

Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi

11

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower

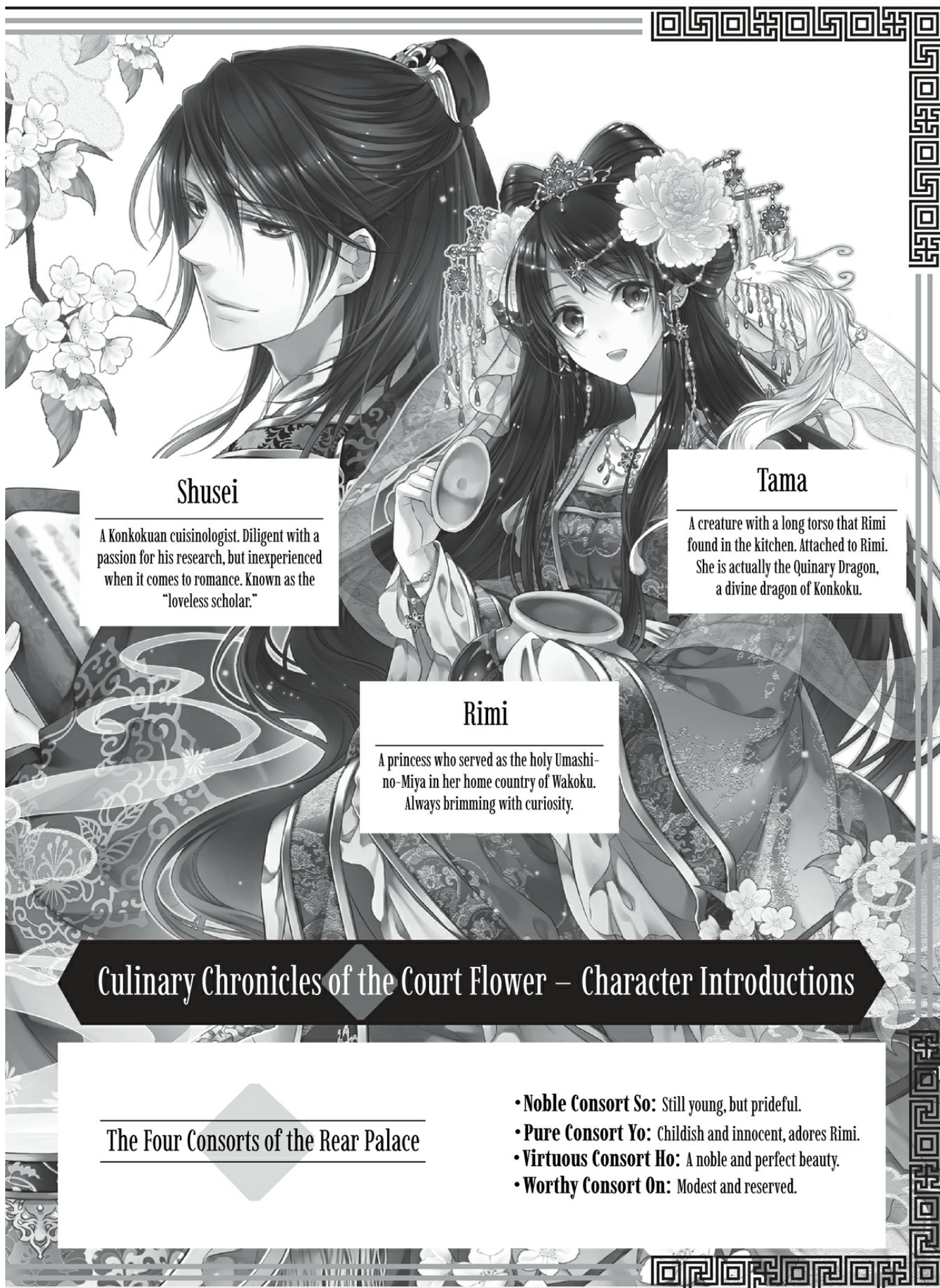




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Shusei

A Konkoku cuisineologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi. She is actually the Quinary Dragon, a divine dragon of Konkoku.

Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

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Fog hung thick in the air.

The Red River, the great waterway to the north of Konkoku's capital of Annei, shone as rosy as ever. Its name had been earned from the red clay that dissolved into the water from its banks.

Summer's warmth remained in the deep layers of the earth and turned the previous night's rain into the morning's mist. It rolled off of the Red River.

The air was so impenetrably white, one couldn't be sure of what laid a few steps away. The morning sun had begun to reveal the thick blanket of fog, but from within, one could hardly be sure they were still in the land of the living, much less make out the rising sun.

A fisherman awakened in his little hovel beside the river. When he left his home and was greeted by the impenetrable wall of fog, he quickly gave up on fishing for the day. As he wondered when the mist might fade away, he stretched and stared out into the barrier of white. He thought he could hear something strange out in the mist. It was a low, groaning noise.

The man wondered what it could be, and as he strained his eyes to see through the haze, he was able to see that part of the fog was swirling. Amidst the swirl, he caught the occasional glimpse of silver.

The fisherman shivered. There was something massive beyond that veil of mist.

A strange sound was coming from the river as well, as if something immense was working its way slowly down the stream. It was accompanied by the groan of timber.

Something's off.

It felt different from the usual morning fog.

The fisherman's seven-year-old son came out of the hovel to join his father.

"What are you looking at, papa?" the boy asked while rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

The fisherman reflexively clutched his son's shoulder. They both looked out into the mist.

“Not quite sure what I’m looking at. Not sure what I’m hearing either.”

“What do you mean, papa?”

“Something’s happening.”

Chapter 1: Into the Tiger's Den

I

As the carriage raced along, Rimi and the four consorts huddled together and clutched each others' hands. The carriage bounced and shook so violently that Rimi feared she might end up biting her tongue.

Outside the carriage, the rumble of hoofbeats and soldiers marching felt like it was shaking the very earth. Ahead, leaders rang small bells to keep the soldiers from losing their formation in the mist.

After leaving the palace gates, the carriage had violently shifted direction several times. Each turn had made the consorts jerk, and they had to be careful to keep their heads from knocking against the walls.

Just as Rimi was wondering how long they'd have to endure the shaking, it finally calmed, but the carriage picked up speed. It seemed like they were racing straight ahead. Presumably, the army had rounded Mount Bi, which meant it was a straight shot for the Red River.

Unfortunately, the Ho House's forces would almost certainly be waiting somewhere along the way.

The enemy is expecting us. I'm certain we're going to run into each other.

As she braved the carriage's bouncing, Rimi tensed her body, readying herself for that moment.

Somewhere in the distance, she began to hear the voices of soldiers.

Is it starting?!

The consorts squeezed each others' hands again and exchanged glances.

As the troops' voices swelled, the carriage began to slow.

"Hakurei! What's happening?!" Virtuous Consort Ho called sharply to the driver's seat.

“I assume we’ve run into the enemy. If we’re able to cut through, our formation will pick up speed again. Be ready,” the eunuch responded.

With the thick fog hanging in the air, there was no way to see the enemy. All they could do was guess what was happening.

“This is all going according to plan though, right?” Pure Consort Yo asked the others with a strained grin.

“Exactly. We have thirty thousand men, and they have less than twenty thousand. With an advantage of ten thousand men, we’ll force our way through with no problem,” Noble Consort So answered confidently.

The carriage slowed down even more. The soldiers’ voices didn’t seem to grow any closer, but the carriage soon came to a stop. They could hear a soft neighing nearby. The horsemen escorting them must have stopped as well.

“What do you think is going on?” Worthy Consort On asked worriedly as she gazed out the window. They could hear what sounded like the clash of battle, yet they still had no clue what was happening.

In the mist ahead, the fighting grew louder. The conflict was getting closer. The horses seemed to sense it too as their neighing grew agitated, and the carriage shook. One of the horses had gone wild and collided with the back of the wagon. When Rimi looked out the window, she could see nearby horses pawing the ground, apparently frightened of what awaited them in the distance.

Rimi jumped up and leaned out of the carriage window.

“Master Hakurei! What’s...”

Hakurei was standing halfway out of his seat. His eyes were squinted tightly as he attempted to see through the mist in spite of his diminished eyesight. There was something grave about the look in his amber eyes. He seemed nervous, and his hand clutched tightly at his sheathed sword.

Is this not going as expected?!

Suddenly, angry shouts began to resound from far ahead.

“Break through! Break through!”

When the emperor's army had decided to charge into the mist, they'd believed their troop advantage would let them penetrate the enemy's lines. Since they outmanned the enemy by ten thousand men, they would crush their formation and open a way to the Red River. The sheer force of numbers would carry them through.

Yet the emperor's forces were at a standstill.

They should have been able to make a steady push through the enemy's line, but that wasn't happening.

We've run into them, but we aren't pushing through.

On the contrary; it felt like they were losing ground.

Rimi held her breath and looked in the same direction as Hakurei.

The sun was continuing to rise, which was making the inland fog begin to dissipate. One could make out the vague shapes of cavalry surrounding the carriage. The consort urgently scanned the area, looking for Shohi.

She managed to spot him further into the mist, atop a horse and clad in armor, flanked by Shin Jotetsu and Kyo Kunki. His expression seemed stern. Behind him, Chancellor Shu Kojin and Minister of Personnel Ryo Renka were also on horses. She could see Minister of Revenue To Rihan as well. All of them seemed desperate and nervous as they gazed out into the fog.

Rimi could tell from their expressions that something was happening. Something they hadn't planned for.

"Lady Setsu, do you see anything?!" So asked, pushing her way to look through the window alongside Rimi, who frantically tried to stop her fellow consort.

"I don't know, but it seems like something unexpected is happening. You should keep your head down. Something might happen to you!" Rimi said.

"Well then, the same goes for you too!" So responded angrily, tugging at Rimi's sleeve.

"I'm fine," Rimi responded with a smile. "Like His Majesty said, I'm sturdier than you four. If anything happens, I'll let you know."

When Yo heard that things weren't going according to plan, she shrunk down even further and clung to So. Ho had her back pressed right up against the wall of the carriage with her arms stretched around the other three as if to protect them. On, beneath Ho's embrace, opened up the string-bound book she was carrying. Her hands trembled slightly.

"A little light reading, On?" Ho teased, forcing a smile.

On met her forced smile with one of her own as she leafed through the book with trembling hands.

"Yes, I feel like I'm so close to understanding what the Quinary Dragon meant," she explained. On then turned to Rimi. "Lady Setsu, you said you heard the dragon say 'it is decided.' Were you the only one who heard it? What about His Majesty or Lord Ho?"

"I'm the only one that heard it. Do you think that means something?" Rimi asked.

"It might. Give me a moment." On began to run her finger along the text and mutter to herself. "Yes, I'm sure... No, no, I can't jump to conclusions. I need more evidence."

Tama...

Rimi turned her gaze to the fog-clouded sky.

Where could you have gone? You shook your head when I asked if you were leaving us. That has to mean we'll meet again, right?

But why would the dragon have left Shohi at such a critical moment? Perhaps it was more reasonable to assume that Tama couldn't stand the fighting and had fled the area temporarily, but Rimi worried that was a little too hopeful.

The idea that Tama had given up on Shohi was unbearable. Rimi gazed out into the fog and prayed.

His Majesty is perfectly suited to the throne. I can't think of anyone who'd be a better fit. Please, Tama! Come back to him!

"Let me through! Let me through!"

Rimi could hear someone calling out from behind the carriage. Through the

thinning mist, she could see what looked like a mounted scout. He was driving his horse through the army's lines, headed straight for Shohi.

His face was white as bone.

"Rimi, how did he look?" Hakurei whispered.

"Upset," she responded softly.

Hakurei silently nodded.

Something terrible is happening.

Rimi was sure of it.



The army's vanguard had clashed with the Ho forces. But Shohi had been ready. When news reached the emperor at the center of the formation where he and his council waited, he stoically ordered that the push to the Red River continue. It was all going according to plan.

The enemy numbered around twenty thousand, while he commanded thirty thousand.

The Ho House must have anticipated that Shohi would amass his forces and charge for the Red River. But with the fog, they would have no way to tell where the emperor's forces would try to break through. Therefore, they would likely assume a wide formation.

Which created the perfect opportunity for Shohi.

With the enemy's forces spread wide, punching a hole through their formation would be simple. With a disadvantage of ten thousand men, they would surely be stretched thin.

And yet, when the emperor's forces met with the enemy's, they had been stopped completely. The soldiers were unable to pierce through the melee.

"What's going on?" Shohi asked, furrowing his brow. Beyond the obscuring mist, he could hear the sound of combat. The emperor pulled his horse alongside Kojin's.

"With this fog, I can't be sure, but the same should be true for our enemy,"

the chancellor said with a serious look. “They should have no choice but to use a wide formation, and with their forces spread thin, it should be easy to break through.”

Just then, the army’s ranks began to move backward, as if they were being pushed away. The horses neighed anxiously.

Renka and Rihan brought their horses alongside Shohi’s.

“Something’s wrong, Kojin!” Renka cried.

“We sent out a scout when we left the palace,” Rihan said as he scanned the surroundings. “The mist is starting to fade. Maybe he’ll find something.”

Shohi strained his eyes to try and see beyond the thinning fog.

This haze has hidden our forces until now, but it’s starting to fade.

The fog tended to come both from the earth and the Red River. So even if the nearby mist was starting to fade away, the Red River likely remained shrouded.

Shohi gripped the reins tightly when he suddenly heard a voice.

“Let me through!”

“The scout! He’s back!” Rihan shouted, turning his horse around.

The mounted scout adeptly weaved his way between the surrounding cavalry. As he neared Rihan, he jumped down from his horse, raced over, and kneeled.

“I have something to report!” the scout shouted between heaving breaths. “The mist is starting to fade, so I was able to see the Red River from Mount Bi. I was finally able to get a good look at the enemy’s formation, and they’re spread wide as we’d guessed, but...”

As the scout looked up, the despair was clear in his eyes.

“The enemy’s forces match our own. They have thirty thousand troops. The enemy’s formation is far deeper than we thought!”

II

They have thirty thousand men?

That was impossible.

“You’re certain? They couldn’t have already recalled the troops they deployed on the other sides of the palace, could they?” Kojin asked calmly.

“No, there are still six thousand men to the east, west, and south,” the scout reported, looking at Kojin imploringly. “The thirty thousand doesn’t include those men. The Ho forces are deployed in a wide formation across the lands leading to the Red River. With the fog coming off the river, I wasn’t able to see the rear of their formations. But based on their arrangement, I believe they reach all the way to the riverbanks.”

“So, you’re saying they have masses of troops all along the river,” Renka grumbled.

“Where could they have gotten that many men?” Rihan asked with a scowl.

Shohi bit his lip angrily.

You never slip up, do you, Shusei?

They’d never even realized they were being cornered. Shohi looked around in a daze. Amidst the thinning haze, he saw Rimi hanging out of a carriage window, and Hakurei in the driver’s seat clutching a sword. Realization dawned on him. That was the four consorts’ carriage.

Inside that carriage are people who trust and serve me.

The four consorts were all from good houses. If they had simply abandoned Shohi and returned home, they’d have been safe. Yet they’d unhesitatingly declared themselves to be the emperor’s servants and followed him into battle.

His brother Hakurei had sacrificed his own body to protect Shohi.

And Rimi was a princess of Wakoku who’d been sent as tribute. She hadn’t been raised to revere the Konkokuan emperor. Yet she’d cast off her homeland to be by Shohi’s side. She had shown him kindness, held him tight, and made him feel as if nothing was going to change.

I have to think of something. I have to do something.

An urge swelled from deep inside him, born neither from desperation nor a sense of duty.

If I don't, it'll all be over. Shusei and the Ho House will hold the throne. I can't hand the throne over to a man who speaks of stability while casually bringing war.

Kan Cho'un sprang to mind, the man who had rallied the prefectural armies on Shohi's behalf. They called him the Hero of the Countryside. He was a man who wanted nothing more than to see that the people were fed and protected. For that reason, he'd come to help. The man believed in Shohi's rule.

The people around Shohi had pledged themselves, sacrificed their bodies, offered him kindness, and given their belief. He had to protect them.

I will remain emperor.

It was Shohi's duty. It was the only way he could repay the things he'd been given.

"If soldiers are still surrounding the palace, that means we can't fall back."

Kojin and the ministers all looked at the emperor in surprise.

"What? Am I wrong?" Shohi asked.

"No, you're right. There's no way to go but forward," Kojin replied.

Shohi nodded.

"Then we need to fight with everything we have to overrun them! If we wait too long to act, our options will be limited," he announced.

"We should change formation," Renka added.

"Now?! After we've met the enemy?!" Rihan asked, eyes wide in disbelief.

"That's a disaster waiting to happen. Would the troops even be able to change formation mid-battle?"

"It's impossible to make a large-scale change to a formation that moves against the enemy, but we can if we move with their momentum. The prefectural armies are also well-trained and quick to relay information. I think it can be done," Renka explained. "Your Majesty! We're currently in block formation, but if we shift to an arrowhead, we should be able to push deep into the enemy's formation and reach the river."

A block formation positioned the soldiers in a single mass. It was good for moving a large number of forces at once and was easily defensible. However, when met with an equal-sized army, an arrowhead was more effective at piercing enemy lines with a small number of troops. True to its name, it was like an arrow that punctured the enemy's position.

"But an arrowhead would leave Your Majesty, the bureaucrats, and everyone from the rear palace poorly defended. Even if we shift formation, it should be a wedge."

The wedge positioned troops in a triangle, the tip of which was used to pierce the enemy's lines. It excelled both offensively and defensively, but it had less penetrating power than the arrowhead.

"If we don't manage to get past them, we'll end up being encircled," Renka replied, turning to Rihan. "The enemy didn't take a wide formation out of laziness. Once they know where we are, they'll fold the rest of their formation around us like crane wings. We have to break through before they can do that."

"An arrowhead or a wedge. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. Only His Majesty can decide what risks to take," Kojin said. He turned and looked intently at the emperor. "Your Majesty, you must decide. What formation will we take?"

The underlying question was: "What sacrifices are you willing to make?"

There were risks both ways, but the losses would differ depending on the choice. Kojin was making Shohi choose who would die.

An arrowhead formation will put the bureaucrats and people from the rear palace at risk. They can't fight. It would put me at risk as well. But it also has a higher chance of breaking the enemy's lines.

Shohi gripped his horse's reins.

A wedge will protect me and the civilians at its center, but it has less chance of breaking through.

What was more necessary? That was the question.

They couldn't fall back to the palace anymore. With that in mind, they had no

choice but to breach the enemy's formation. No matter how dangerous, no matter the sacrifices involved, if they didn't make it past the enemy, there would be no point to any of it.

That's what matters right now. Breaking through.

Shohi grimaced at the bitter thought.

There will be losses. In the worst case, we could lose the four consorts, Rimi, and Hakurei. But still...

He opened his eyes and clenched his jaw.

Unless we break through, it will be the end for all of us.

As emperor, the decision was clear.

"Take up an arrowhead formation. Cut through the enemy! On to the Red River!" he commanded, raising a hand in the air.



The Red River flowed behind the Ho forces. Presumably, at least. With the thick fog rolling off of the river, it almost looked like solid land. A couple of unlucky soldiers had taken a wrong step and tumbled in, but they were quickly fished out. It would've been a much bigger issue if any horses had fallen in, so the cavalry was kept some distance from the riverbank.

Shusei sat atop his horse, silently looking into the distance. The chief general and Minister of Justice, similarly mounted, flanked him.

The chief general was clad in dark-gray armor with a helmet that came down to cover his cheeks. The ornamental plume made of bird feathers atop his helmet, damp from the mist, had begun to droop. The Minister of Justice was wearing a breastplate.

Shusei also wore a breastplate, but he found it irritating. It was incredibly heavy and made maneuvering his horse more difficult.

What's the use if it only protects my chest?

A person's most vulnerable spots were their head and neck. But the chief general had vehemently recommended that the scholar wear the breastplate, so he'd complied. Still, it seemed to do little more than emphasize the fact that

he was ready for battle.

Shusei squeezed his eyes shut.

Shrouded in the fog, it was terribly quiet, despite the thirty thousand men around him. The sound of the Red River flowing behind him was the loudest thing he could hear.

This damn mist. Will it be in time?

Shusei suddenly grew worried. But he remembered how the Quinary Dragon's blue eyes had seemed the night before. There had been no condemnation when it had nodded to him.

The right person will be made emperor. I'm sure of it.

His worry turned to conviction as he opened his eyes.

Suddenly, the scholar heard voices from somewhere off to the right, far in the distance. He couldn't see through the mist, but both the chief general and Minister of Justice leaned forward on their horses.

"It's begun!" the chief general shouted with an excited grin. He turned to Shusei. "The emperor's forces are pushing into us, just like you expected, Lord Ho!"

"Go, general. That must be where they're trying to break through. You can't let them pass, nor can you let them divide our forces. Focus on reinforcing our position and keeping them away from the Red River, then take charge of the counterattack," Shusei ordered.

"Yes, Lord Ho. Leave it to me," the chief general said, bringing his fist against his palm in a martial salute. With an eager kick, he and his horse leaped into action and faded into the mist.

"Are you sure it's wise to leave that brute in charge?" the Minister of Justice asked with a daring smile. "He's a brave warrior, but he's no tactical genius."

"We don't need tactics here. We're using brute force."

Shusei traced out the formations on both sides in his mind.

The Ho forces had arranged themselves along the river in a wide formation,

which Kojin would be anticipating. However, he would also be expecting to have an advantage of ten thousand men, so with the emperor's safety in mind, Kojin would likely elect to move in a block formation. But when the clash came, they would likely realize that the Hos had more forces than they anticipated and would shift formation to try and break through.

They'll probably use either a wedge or arrowhead formation.

If Shohi let himself get carried away by timid thinking, he would choose the wedge. However...

Knowing Shohi, he'll choose the arrowhead.

Shusei was confident of it. The chief general had been told that the enemy must not pass. A breach would mean failure. When the enemy came flying at him like a streaking arrow, he would be dead set on stopping them and use the sheer force of bodies to keep them from advancing.

Perfect.

Suddenly, the Minister of Justice turned around.

"What's that?" he asked.

Shusei turned around as well, following the minister's gaze. There was a strange sound in the river, hidden in the mist. It was like something large was churning the water.

"I hear something strange," the minister said, narrowing his eyes.

"Who knows," Shusei said, putting on his best smile. "But even if it were some great beast thrashing around down there, we'd still be safe on land. There's nothing to worry about."

A small bonfire's flame flickered on the banks of the Red River where the Ho forces lurked. Several soldiers caught sight of the flame but took no notice of the man, a fisherman from the look of him, warming himself by the fire.

As the chief general charged for the battle lines, he shivered in excitement from the sound of combat. The thrill of battle had him in great spirits. When he noticed the fisherman, he shouted to him.

"You there! This is about to be a battlefield! You should get to safety while

you still can!”

The fisherman stood and seemed to look in the general’s direction. It was hard to see his face through the mist, but he appeared to have a strong build.

“Do you think the enemies will make it all the way here?” the man asked.

“You know, I don’t think they will,” the general responded with a grin, “because I’m going to stop them!”

“Then as long as you’re here, I suppose I’m safe where I am,” the fisherman replied.

“I suppose you are!” the general laughed before turning his horse inland. As he rode, he roared out orders. “Soldiers! Form on me! Don’t let the enemy pass!”

The fisherman turned back to his fire. Piles of dried branches sat to the left and right of it. He lit both of them, creating three bright blazes among the mist.

III

“We’re shifting formations! Be ready!”

“Prepare for attacks from the left and right!”

All around, tense voices called out to each other. The carriage with Rimi and the four consorts moved up closer to the center of the formation where Shohi, Kojin, and the ministers waited. Everyone, including the soldiers who had been protecting the emperor, his council, and the civilians, began charging ahead.

Rimi’s carriage came to a stop right behind Shohi.

“Your Majesty!” she cried as she leaned from the window.

Shohi seemed surprised to hear the consort call to him, but he smiled.

“Get back inside. You’re going to hurt yourself,” he said.

“Is something going on?” Hakurei asked.

“The enemy has more men than we thought. We’re going to change formation and cut through them,” Shohi explained as he drew his sword. “But

we're going to have fewer soldiers protecting us. We might be exposed to attacking soldiers. Be ready, Hakurei. Rimi and the four consorts are under your care."

Hakurei seemed to glean from the emperor's pained admission that things were growing dire. He looked at his little brother with unfocused eyes.

"Understood, Your Majesty. Take care."

"I will."

Hearing the brothers' exchange, So and Yo popped out of the window alongside Rimi, unable to hold back any longer. Ho and On leaned out of the window on the other side.

"Your Majesty! Don't do anything drastic!" Ho shouted.

"Remember to take care of yourself!" On pleaded.

"Take care of yourself! Please!" So cried tearfully.

"That's right! You're a lot skinnier than those soldiers!" Yo added desperately.

"Don't be rude!" So said, sharply pinching Yo's cheek.

"Ow ow ow ow ow!"

Shohi looked shocked by the consorts' sudden appearance but began to chuckle.

"Leave things to me, my consorts. And you too, Rimi and Hakurei. Relax. I'm here with you," the emperor ordered.

Jotetsu drew his sword as well and gave the worried Rimi and Hakurei a teasing wink.

"He's right. There's nothing to worry about, so all of you can get back inside," the spy said with a cheerful smile. The consorts couldn't help but answer with a smile of their own.

"Good luck in battle," So said calmly, serving as the usual representative for the others.

"I'm not going to lose," Shohi responded with a smile and a nod.

He seemed so dazzling to Rimi.

He is the emperor.

Of course, he'd been the emperor of Konkoku from the first day that Rimi had met him. But now, more than ever, he seemed to rise above everyone else as a leader. Despite being betrayed and on the run, he could still smile at his servants. He was surely wracked with uncertainty, but he managed to smile for those supporting him.

I'm certain of it. He's the one and only ruler of Konkoku.

Rimi continued watching Shohi in a daze. He rode up beside the coach and lightly poked her cheek.

"Empty-headed as ever, aren't you? You're the only one who hasn't pulled their head back into the carriage, you know."

"Oops!"

Rimi hadn't even noticed the other consorts had slipped back into the coach and were braced for it to start shaking again.

"I'm sorry! I was just daydreaming!" she apologized. Before leaving the window, she looked at Shohi once more. "Your Majesty, I am looking at the ruler of Konkoku right now. No matter what anyone says, to me, there's no emperor but you."

Shohi blinked a few times before smiling.

"We agree then," he said. His expression hardened, and his voice turned sharp. "If we breach any part of the enemy's line, the army will begin moving all at once. If that happens, we'll be thrust into a melee. Be ready."

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said. Up on the driver's seat, Hakurei drew his sword.

As Rimi returned inside the wagon, she squeezed herself against the other consorts. She shrunk down but continued to hold on to her book.

His Majesty won't lose. Not to the likes of Lord Ho.

Ho Shusei, lord of the Ho House, was likely somewhere on the battlefield, lying in wait and ready to corner them. No detail escaped his cunning. The man

who had murdered her sweet cuisinologist was putting his wicked mind to work.

But His Majesty is still going to beat you.

She sensed Shohi pull away from their carriage.

The skirmish up ahead grew noticeably louder. Just as the consorts exchanged looks, their wagon darted forward.



The imperial army was amassing at the vanguard, reinforcing their formation to make an arrow that would pierce the Ho forces' lines. Once the leading soldiers had bitten into the enemy formation, they began thrusting forward, wrenching a hole open in the enemy's lines. The thirty thousand soldiers, who had previously been obstructed, slowly began to advance.

Overwhelmed by the thrust, the enemy forces began to crack, and the vanguard's advance picked up speed.

Atop his horse, Shohi could feel his hair stand on end from the nerves. His mount sped up from a trot to a gallop. It wasn't just Shohi either. The carriages and horses carrying bureaucrats began to speed up as well.

As the formation gained speed, it began to spread out and lose some of its density. The emperor's forces were on the move, but they were more open to attack. As if to prove it, footmen and cavalry, presumably belonging to the enemy, began to appear around the imperial army. They were likely trying to cut through the outer infantry and cavalry to make their way into the heart of the formation.

Shohi clenched his jaw as his eyes raced across the surroundings.

Can we make it to the river? And even if we do...

The enemy was in a wide formation, but they had probably begun to harden their position when they saw the emperor was trying to break through. They would make a wall of bodies all the way to the Red River. Just as Renka had said, even if they did manage to breach the enemy formation, the Ho forces would be ready to encircle them from behind. The losses would be great.

Suddenly, Shohi heard a loud sound to his left. A carriage, likely carrying bureaucrats, had overturned, and enemy soldiers were bearing down on it.

What if that had been the consorts' carriage? Shohi shuddered at the thought.

To his right, a horse collapsed in a cloud of dust. Shohi was only able to catch a brief glimpse, but the rider had likely been met with an enemy spear.

How many men will even survive this?!

To Shohi's left and right, Jotetsu and Kunki rode with unsheathed swords and wary eyes. Even Hakurei, who was atop the carriage behind them, had his sword at the ready.

Golden dust swirled violently ahead, mixing with the mist and making it difficult to tell what was happening within. Amidst the plume, soldiers seemed to undulate like crashing waves.

The footmen and cavalry had come to a halt ahead of Shohi, so he pulled on his reins to stop his horse as well. The horse squealed and stamped the ground, taking a while for Shohi to calm it. Once he'd soothed his mount, the emperor looked ahead once more. An icy shiver ran down his spine.

It had devolved into a melee. The vanguard was apparently having a hard time breaching the enemy lines.

Jotetsu and Kunki pulled up beside Shohi. Kojin, Renka, and Rihan gathered around as well.

"We're going to be surrounded at this rate," Renka grumbled.

"Close ranks! Hold your positions like your lives depend on it! Vanguard, advance!" Kojin shouted, issuing rapid-fire orders.

"That's a thick wall of soldiers. Their ranks might stretch all the way to the river," Rihan noted, squinting to see what was happening ahead.

"It doesn't make sense... Why focus on the front lines...?" Kojin muttered.

Jotetsu, sword at his side, gave Shohi a strained but confident grin.

"You've gotta stay behind us, Your Majesty," he said.

The emperor's soldiers began to close ranks and take up defensive positions. At the center of it all were Shohi and the consorts' carriages.

Shohi gripped the sheath of his sword again. As he listened to the chaotic melee grow closer, he scanned his surroundings.

So our arrow has hit a wall and shattered without going through?

The arrowhead formation had flown true, but it wasn't able to penetrate a wall of enemies. The shaft of the arrow was warping and collapsing, leading to a complete standstill.

The enemy formation was far bulkier than expected. They were probably concentrating all their forces where Shohi was trying to pierce through their formation to keep him away from the river.

The emperor could hear the clash of combat nearby. Even the soldiers defending him were meeting the enemy.

What do I do?

Panic was closing in on him.

Just then, a horseman charged at Shohi from the right. His spear was raised and aimed at the emperor.

Kunki spurred his horse forward and deflected the tip of the enemy's spear. Jotetsu leaped from his horse and brandished his sword as he slid across the ground to the enemy horse's feet. The enemy's mount squealed and fell to the side, sending the spear-wielder crashing to the ground. Without hesitation, Jotetsu charged at the man and thrust his sword into the crack between the enemy's helmet and armor.

"We've got another one, Kunki!" the spy shouted as he pulled his sword out of his foe. He then sprinted for his horse and leaped onto the saddle.

Meanwhile, Kunki charged to intercept another advancing rider. As their horses passed, Kunki slashed his enemy across the chest. The rider flipped backward and fell to the ground, his horse bolting away.

Jotetsu brought his mount to stand in front of Shohi. It was the two of them, Kojin, Renka, Rihan, and the transportation bearing the consorts. The party was

at the center of a circular mass of soldiers, all in defensive positions.

Beyond the encircling soldiers, Shohi spotted two or three horsemen with bows. They shot at the emperor, but Jotetsu and Kunki were there to swat the arrows away. One of the arrows, which was out of their reach, landed at the foot of Kojin's horse, causing the beast to squeal in fright. Two more arrows lodged themselves in the carriage holding the consorts. The driver recoiled, and Hakurei jumped to his feet with his sword ready.

They were cornered and their formation was collapsing. Shohi could feel it. He looked ahead where his forces were clashing against an unbreakable enemy.

Shusei.

The emperor glared into the swirl of fog and dust as if hoping to find Shusei somewhere beyond it.

I don't care what happens. I'm not going to lose to you.

"Jotetsu, follow me!" Shohi shouted, gripping his sheath again.

The emperor kicked his horse, spurring it forward.

"Your Majesty! You can't! It's too dangerous!" Kojin shouted after him.

"If we don't break through them here, we'll be surrounded and crushed! I won't let it end here!" Shohi shouted in reply. He then turned his attention to the soldiers trying to guard him. "Make way and follow after me!"

"Your Majesty!" Jotetsu shouted.

"Wait!" Kunki called.

Both charged after the emperor.

"You can't, Your Majesty!" Hakurei cried out from somewhere far behind Shohi.

As the emperor charged for the dust-shrouded melee, he raised his sword high.

"Do you see? The emperor of Konkoku is here with you! The enemy's arrows and swords will never reach me! The gods protect me!" Shohi shouted.

The soldiers on the front lines, apparently surprised by his voice, raised a

battle cry.

“There is nothing to fear! We are winning! Onward!” Shohi commanded.

Even if Heaven’s favor wasn’t with him, he couldn’t afford to lose this battle. Not now that he’d drawn his supporters into this war.



This is insane.

Jotetsu charged toward the soldiers closing in on Shohi, swinging his sword without a moment’s rest. Panic was beginning to overtake him.

If he puts himself on the front lines, I’m not going to be able to protect him.

But Shohi wasn’t going to fall back. If he did, it would be crushing for morale by making it appear as if the formation was caving in.

An emperor was never supposed to be on the front lines, yet they’d found themselves in a situation where that was the only option. From that perspective, Shohi was making the right choice. It was insane and dangerous, but it was necessary. If the soldiers started to believe that the emperor’s safety was taking priority over the mission, their spirits would falter and the enemy would crush them. This wasn’t the time to worry about precedent or good sense.

“Kunki!” Jotetsu shouted. The bodyguard had reins in one hand and a sword in the other as he waded into the melee. “We can’t fall back! Stay with His Majesty!”

“I know!” Kunki shouted, shoulders heaving between each swing of his sword. “But there are too many of them! How long do we have to hold out?!”

“Our job isn’t done until the vanguard destroys the enemy!”

Chapter 2: A Misty Morning's Declaration

I

"You can't, Your Majesty!"

When the consorts heard Hakurei's cry, they all looked up.

"What's going on?!" So shouted. The Noble Consort tried jumping to her feet, but Rimi stopped her.

"It's dangerous out there, So. Let me," Rimi said.

Arrows had been thumping against the carriage. There was no way she could let So stick her head out into that. As Rimi neared the window, an arrow streaked right past her eyes. She shuddered.

"Master Hakurei, what's happening?!" Rimi asked.

"His Majesty just charged into the front lines..." the eunuch replied, dumbfounded. The four consorts blanched at the words.

"Why would he do that?!" Rimi cried.

"I suppose he's trying to improve morale."

If the push ended up being halted, the emperor's forces would be crushed. Even Rimi understood that. For Shohi to be putting himself into the fray, then they must have been completely out of options. He was not the type to carelessly charge into danger. He knew how important his duty was as the emperor and how many people wanted him to live a long life. Shohi would never join the front lines unless they were on the verge of destruction.

Rimi's face went white, and she froze in place.

"No... It can't be... Is it over for us?" Yo whimpered.

"Quiet! Of course not!" So snapped.

Just then, On opened the book she was carrying and began frantically

skimming the text.

“I don’t think now is the time for books,” Ho urged. But On glanced up with a hard look that was very unlike her.

“No, now is the time. Look. I finally found it. I found an explanation of what the Quinary Dragon was saying! Lady Setsu!” On called.

At the sound of her voice, Rimi jerked to attention.

“I’ve found an account of someone who heard the Quinary Dragon speak at an emperor’s ascension,” On explained. “It said ‘He is fit to be emperor.’ But only one person heard the voice, a priest who was already certain that the man would be a fitting emperor. That was why he was able to hear the dragon’s voice. That’s what it says here.”

Rimi simply stared at the page On was holding open for her. She couldn’t make sense of what her fellow consort was trying to say.

“What do you mean, On?” Rimi asked.

“The people who know someone is suited to be emperor are the ones who can hear the Quinary Dragon’s voice. What I’m saying is, the person receiving Heaven’s blessing was the one you believed to be the rightful emperor!”

Rimi’s fingers began to tremble as realization dawned on her.

“That means... You’re saying that voice...”

“When you were at Koto, who did you think was more suited for the throne?!”

Well, that’s obvious.

Then and now, the answer was the same. Rimi knew none were better suited to be the emperor than Shohi.

“His Majesty. I’ve always believed that, and I still do. I don’t believe there’s any choice but him.”

“Then that means the Quinary Dragon has chosen Ryu Shohi as emperor of Konkoku! That’s why you heard its voice!”

A tremor of joy ran through Rimi’s body.

He's the only one! Heaven recognizes it too!

Suddenly, the outside of the carriage seemed to brighten. As if drawn by the light, Rimi turned her attention out the window. A beam of light seemed to weave its way through the wisps of fog and between the cavalrymen. It was like it was reaching out to Rimi and guiding her.

"What's that light?" she asked. The four consorts exchanged unsure glances.

"Light? What light?" Ho asked, puzzled.

Rimi pointed to the belt of light.

"Right there. It's like a ribbon of light leading to the front lines."

"I don't see anything," Yo said. The other three nodded.

Rimi was about to say that was impossible, but suddenly, a thought occurred to her.

I have to go to His Majesty. That light is going to lead me to him.

The thought wasn't intuition. It felt more like a divine revelation. Perhaps her childhood in Wakoku serving as Umashi-no-Miya beside Wakoku's greatest priestess let her recognize its divine significance. She knew that it would lead to Shohi, and she knew what she had to tell him.

A powerful impulse began to well inside the consort.

I have to tell him.

Things had grown so desperate that Shohi had felt the need to charge for the front lines. He must have been frantically trying to keep from losing heart. The emperor needed to know that he had Heaven's favor. It would surely bolster his spirit.

She must go to the emperor and declare to him that they were winning and Heaven stood with him.

"His Majesty is blessed by Heaven. I'm going to tell him," Rimi explained as she opened the coach's door and leaped outside.

"You can't, dearest!" Yo cried, but Rimi ignored her shocked pleas.

When Hakurei realized that Rimi had hopped out of the carriage, he jumped

down from the driver's seat.

"What are you doing, Rimi?! It's dangerous out here! Get back inside!" he shouted, grabbing her by the shoulder. But the consort shook her head.

"I can see a light! It's leading to His Majesty! I have to go!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I see a light!" Rimi repeated, looking up at the eunuch and clutching his sleeve. "Heaven stands with His Majesty. When Tama said 'it was decided,' she meant she'd decided he was right for the throne. I know because I heard her. That's why I was able to hear her voice. I know that now, and I need to tell His Majesty! That's why I can see the light!"

"A light...?"

An arrow whizzed past the pair. Hakurei held Rimi close and pulled them into the shadow of the carriage.

"You're sure?" the eunuch asked.

"Yes!" she said with a nod.

Hakurei frowned and spent a few moments in thought. He then grabbed her hand.

"Come on!" he shouted as he pulled her into the storm of arrows. They were headed for Kojin. "Chancellor Shu! I want to get Rimi to His Majesty. Find a horse for her, immediately. I'd go myself, but I can't ride a horse with my eyes in this condition."

Kojin frowned at them from atop his horse.

"What on earth are you saying, Hakurei? Do you realize the situation we're in?" the chancellor asked.

"Heaven has given His Majesty its blessing. Rimi is certain of it, and she needs to go tell him."

"What point is there in telling him that?" Kojin scoffed.

"There is a point! I see a light leading to His Majesty! That's why I have to go to him!" Rimi cried out. She clutched the sleeve of Kojin's shenyi. "His Majesty

is fighting desperately. He's giving all of his courage and strength to fight back against losing odds. At a time like this, he has to know that Heaven is supporting him! Please, I need to tell him. That's why the light is there!"

As Rimi pleaded with the chancellor, another horse approached them.

"You said you saw a light?"

It was Ryo Renka.

"Yes! I still do!" Rimi explained, nodding fervently.

"This girl was a servant of the gods in Wakoku, wasn't she?" Renka asked, turning to Kojin. "Someone like that receiving a divine revelation wouldn't be that surprising. Besides, I agree with her. Whether or not His Majesty actually has Heaven's approval, hearing it from a girl that believes in him will definitely brighten his spirits."

"I need a skilled horseman!" At Renka's shout, a cavalryman came riding up.

"You called?" he asked.

"Take this girl to the front lines," Renka commanded.

The soldier and Kojin both looked stunned.

"You really plan on sending a girl like her to the front lines?" Kojin asked sharply. Renka nodded.

"I do. You want to win, don't you? You want to protect His Majesty? Then you should do everything possible to achieve that. I'm sure Rimi already knows how dangerous it is."

"I'm going!" Rimi said. The finality in her voice silenced the chancellor.

"She's in your hands," Renka said.

The soldier looked from the minister to Rimi with a reluctant expression.

"Is this really safe? She's a palace woman."

"Please! I have to go! I don't care what happens!" Rimi pleaded.

The soldier looked in the consort's eyes, then gave a resolute nod.

"All right," he said and extended an arm. Rimi took his hand, and the soldier

pulled her up onto the horse.

“Take care of her,” Hakurei said imploringly.

“Leave it to me,” the soldier said before spurring his horse.

Trying to keep from being thrown off, Rimi clung to the man from behind as they picked up speed. The sounds of battle grew louder as the horse took them into the fray.

The clang of swords, the cries of agony, and the angry shouts had Rimi so frightened that she had to fight to keep from crying and trembling as she held on to the horseman. It made complete sense why Tama wouldn't want to be in a place like this.

But Tama, if you've really chosen His Majesty, then help him!

At this rate, they would be crushed by the enemy forces. If the emperor's troops weren't able to break through, they would eventually wear out, whether Heaven stood with them or not.

His Majesty has given me a place in the world. He's important to the four consorts too. As long as he's around, we have somewhere to belong. He understands himself, trusts his retainers, and listens to people. There's no better emperor than him. We can't lose him. So please, Tama. Help him. If Heaven is truly with him, then now more than ever, he needs you.

“Where are we going, my lady?” the soldier asked.

Rimi pointed straight ahead in the direction of the light.

“That way! To His Majesty!”



“Don't let them through!” Rihan roared.

Kojin clenched his jaw as he surveyed the surroundings. The bulk of the enemy's forces were concentrated on the front lines, but some had circled around to attack from the sides. The walls around the center of the emperor's formation were beginning to crumble. It was like watching their defenses being slowly whittled away.

Why are you using a strategy like this, Shusei?

If his son had hidden forces the entire time, there were easier ways to win. So why wasn't he using them?

Are you mocking us? Or is this part of your plan?

Fifteen minutes.

They only had a quarter of an hour left. If they were unable to break through the enemy's position before then, Shusei's army would crush the emperor's defenses. Once that happened, there would be no escape for the four consorts, let alone Kojin.

Rimi had claimed Heaven stood with Shohi, but it hardly seemed that way. Still, if her word could give the emperor a bit of courage, that was fine. Something was better than nothing.

But how could they penetrate the enemy's lines in the next fifteen minutes? No strategies came to mind. The only possible hope was...

His Majesty.

Perhaps the emperor's presence on the front lines would embolden their troops and lend them the impossible strength to breach the enemy's formation. It was their only hope left.

But is such a thing possible?

Part of Kojin said yes, and part said no.

Shohi had taken those who had looked at him with disdain, like Kojin and Renka, and turned them into believers. They had been struck by his enthusiasm and genuine earnestness. Would the soldiers on the front lines be transformed by the young emperor in the same way as he charged to join them? If they did, it would have an unbelievable effect on morale.

Perhaps Shohi was capable of it. Perhaps he could overcome this nightmare. And perhaps it was best for Kojin to simply believe it could happen.

Your Majesty, please, keep leading us. You're the only way forward.

“Hakurei! What’s happened to Lady Setsu?!” Ho shouted from the window as Hakurei returned to the carriage.

“She’s gone to see His Majesty. Get back inside. The arrows haven’t stopped,” the eunuch warned.

“But Lady Setsu—”

Hakurei, having reached the coach, interrupted Ho by placing his hand on hers.

“She’s going to be fine. Be calm, Ho. The Quinary Dragon has recognized His Majesty as emperor. I’m certain of it. Now, I’d like for you four to believe in the hope you’ve found.”

Ho looked down at him from the window. With his diminished eyesight, he couldn’t make her face out well enough to read her expression, but he could feel how her hand was trembling. With arrows flying by and the cries of agony, it wasn’t hard to imagine how terrified the women must be.

“I will protect the four consorts at the cost of my life. As director, that is my duty.”

“But Hakurei, you—”

“Trust in me. Now then, inside.”

Ho gave a conflicted nod before ducking back into the coach.

Hakurei returned to the driver’s seat and retrieved the sword he’d left there.

“I’ll protect the right side. I leave the left to you,” the eunuch said to the soldier entrusted with driving the carriage.

“Understood,” the soldier said as he climbed down, and then he added, sounding worried, “but Director, with your eyes...”

Hakurei met the soldier with a piercing gaze and smiled.

“Cutting a man down doesn’t require keen eyesight. Besides, I’ll feel less guilty if I don’t have to see their expressions.”

This was no duel between expert swordsmen. It was a violent battlefield. In a place like this, the unflinching courage, reflexes, and strength to strike your

enemy down were what mattered. What was most important was breaking your enemy's spirit or leaving him unable to fight. A direct blow to the face or a severed finger was enough to discourage them.

Hakurei wasn't a strong man, but he'd brought a light, slender sword to compensate for that. He knew his reflexes were good and was confident in his swordsmanship.

I never imagined I'd put it to use in a place like this though.

As a prince, Hakurei had despised the idea of even touching a sword. But when he'd become a eunuch, he'd begun to secretly polish his skills. It was a dark thing to think about, but he'd believed that somehow, someday, he'd be able to get his revenge on the people who'd taken him from his path.

Still, it was better to keep those people off guard, so he'd kept his training hidden. But when I Bunryo, the former director, had tried to have Rimi killed, he'd been forced to show Jotetsu and Shusei his skill with a blade. In his mind, he had likely already kneeled before his emperor brother by then.

Hakurei brandished his sword.

His Majesty wants the four consorts protected. I will protect them on his behalf. But I'm not sure how long I'll be able to manage that.

Feelings of hopelessness began to threaten the director. As he recognized them, he shook his head and attempted to regain his composure.

No. I will protect them.

Shohi was the emperor. Once, Hakurei could've easily had the throne for himself, but fate had decided its own way for him. Now, he stood with sword in hand, protecting the emperor's consorts as director of the rear palace. Realizing he was prepared to do everything in his power to accomplish that, he smiled slightly.

The fact that Shohi was able to inspire those feelings in Hakurei proved that he was a better fit for the throne than the eunuch. Shohi was a purer, kinder, more honest man. He was brave and won his battles with compassion, not cunning. Perhaps that was exactly why destiny had played out as it had.

Hakurei wanted to believe that Shohi's qualities had driven destiny.

Your Majesty, I will trust in you. And for as long as I have strength, I will protect you.

Rimi had claimed to see a light. He prayed that light would lead to Shohi and grant him the destiny he deserved.

I will defend my little brother's reign.



Shohi's leg burned. If he wasn't careful, he feared he would slip right off his horse.

I can't fall. Not yet.

The emperor clenched his jaw and forced away the urge to groan. The soldiers couldn't know he was injured. He wanted them to believe he was miraculously unharmed amidst a chaotic battle. He could only hope that the enemy's blood splatters would disguise his own bleeding.

"Do not falter! Onward!"

The allied soldiers were enlivened by each of the emperor's calls. They responded by throwing themselves against the enemy en masse.

"Forward! We are winning!"

Nearby foot soldiers leveled their spears. Jotetsu and Kunki desperately waved their swords from atop their horses, trying to keep the encroaching enemy soldiers away from Shohi. Even so, the enemy found openings to charge the emperor with their spears.

With a swing of his sword, Shohi knocked a charging soldier's spear tip away. As he did, he heard a shout from behind him. Shohi turned just in time to see another soldier charging headlong at him with a spear.

Damn!

There was no time to stop him. Luckily, a horseman leaped between the two of them.

"Kunki!"

The enemy soldier's spear was lodged in the stomach of Kunki's horse. The horse reared back, sending the man stumbling forward. With a grimace, Kunki leaped from the ground and cut the enemy's knee. As his foe collapsed, Kunki fell to his knees, grunting with his hand over his chest. He appeared to have reached his limit.

Jotetsu seemed to notice something was wrong and came rushing in with his horse to aid him, but three soldiers with pikes intercepted him. He deflected the spears with his sword, but blood sprayed from the spy as one of the tips found his shoulder.

"Jotetsu!"

The spy used all his strength to fight off the encroaching pikes. He found an opportunity between thrusts to close the distance with his enemies and slice their throats. He then wheeled his horse around to approach the emperor's side.

"Your Majesty, please, fall back!"

"I cannot! The men won't be able to hold out if I go!"

"Your safety comes first!"

"If we lose here, it won't matter!"

Suddenly, Shohi heard a cry.

"Your Majesty!"

It was a young woman's voice, which should've been impossible in the middle of a battlefield. Her high-pitched call cut through the angry bellows of the melee.

"Rimi?!" Shohi shouted in disbelief. As the emperor turned to look, he saw a mounted soldier headed straight for him, with Rimi riding right behind him.

"What are you doing?!"

Kunki, still kneeling, raised his head at the emperor's shocked cry. Seeing the soldier and Rimi's approach, he jumped to his feet. With gritted teeth, the bodyguard raced to meet the horse.

An enemy soldier thrust a spear at the horse bearing Rimi. The animal reared

back, sending her flying.

“My lady!” the mounted soldier shouted.

Kunki made a flying leap to catch Rimi. He used his body to guard the consort, and as they hit the ground, his groan sounded like he was being crushed.

Rimi jumped to her feet and looked at Kunki, who was lying face-up where they’d fallen.

“Master Kunki!”

“Get to His Majesty! Hurry!” the bodyguard grunted and pushed her away.

Rimi, likely realizing that staying any longer would only burden Kunki, gave a tearful nod and ran toward Shohi. The emperor spurred his horse forward to meet her.

“Your Majesty!”

“Rimi!”



The light!

The moment she saw Shohi, she felt like she was going to cry. The faint band of light, which only Rimi could see, wove between horses and soldiers to reach Shohi. It seemed to coil around the emperor, giving off a radiant glow.

Shohi reached down, wrapped an arm around the consort, and pulled her onto his horse to sit in front of him.

“Hold on tight!” he ordered sharply. “What are you thinking, coming to a place like this, you fool?!”

Rimi wrapped her arms around Shohi and looked at him with tearful eyes. He seemed to glitter in the light as she clung to him.

“I came to tell you, Your Majesty! The four consorts found proof!”

“I can’t make any sense of what you’re saying!” Shohi said, nearly shouting. He seemed terribly agitated.

His leg is so bloody.

Maybe the emperor was unable to feel pain through the excitement of the moment, but his leg was stained bright red with blood. Under normal circumstances, nobody would have been able to ride a horse with such wounds.

“Your Majesty, take Rimi and fall back!” Jotetsu shouted as he held soldiers at bay with his sword.

Master Jotetsu and Master Kunki are both injured too.

The din of battle was suffocating, and more than ever, times seemed desperate. Realistically, there seemed to be no way for them to break through. Yet Rimi didn’t believe it. Not when such a radiant being was in front of her, proudly proclaiming his presence.

I know what I heard. The four consorts proved it. And I know I can see the light.

She was looking at a man who knew himself, who pushed forward despite his fears and doubts. A man worthy of being emperor. He had a strong will. His Majesty valued, loved, and tried to grow with the people around him.

If a man like him wasn’t fit for the throne, then who was? Rimi was certain that was exactly why Tama had chosen him.

“Your Majesty, hurry! Things are falling apart here!” Jotetsu shouted again. His horse was agitated, stomping the ground and kicking up dust.

“I cannot retreat!”

“Your Majesty!” Jotetsu pleaded hoarsely. His voice was growing frantic.

Rimi decided to cut in, hoping to get things under control.

“Your Majesty, you have Heaven’s favor!” she declared.

The consort’s voice rang out clearly amid the low roar of battle. She was surprised by it herself. The high pitch of her voice seemed to reach everyone’s ears.

Oh... I know what to do then!

As she clung to the emperor, Rimi spoke as loudly as she could.

“The Quinary Dragon has decided that Your Majesty is the true emperor of

Konkoku! I heard her say it! Only those who agree with the Quinary Dragon's decision are able to hear her voice!"

Rimi raised her voice even higher.

"You are the one and only emperor! I believe it, and the Quinary Dragon has decided it! The Quinary Dragon said that our emperor is right here! Your Majesty has been recognized by Heaven! You have Heaven's blessing!"

Shohi, apparently noticing Rimi was intentionally raising her voice, used his arm to support her while raising his sword with the other.

"Do you hear that, men?! I have Heaven's blessing! Konkoku has no emperor but me!"

Tama! Tama! Tama!

As Rimi clung to Shohi, she called out desperately. She was confident that Tama had chosen Shohi, which meant there was no way the dragon would abandon him.

Tama, I believe in you! Tama!



Time and again, Shohi had inspired the soldiers. But he didn't actually believe there was any hope of winning.

But he couldn't lose. So he had cheered the soldiers on, telling them they were winning while mustering up as much of his own strength as he could. However, despair continued to plague him. It was building up deep inside of him, overflowing, threatening to break his spirit.

That was when Rimi appeared.

Her slender frame was trembling in his arms. She felt warm and delicate. It was that delicateness that made him believe her. He had no idea what proof the four consorts had found, but Rimi had braved the danger to tell him. That, more than anything else, gave Shohi courage.

It's coming from the four consorts and Rimi. There's nothing to doubt about it.

He felt conviction.

It wasn't because he believed he had Heaven's favor. It was because, even in a disastrous situation like this, he had people who would do anything to let him know he had Heaven's favor. It was the conviction that he'd traveled the right path, even if he'd stumbled along the way. It was the belief that he could be a good emperor someday.

I am the emperor.

He didn't give a damn about Heaven's will. All Shohi cared about was leading his country to the peace and tranquility that Kojin had spent so many years building. The people around him had given him ground to stand on, so he wanted to keep giving them a place in the world. He wanted to remain emperor so the people wouldn't suffer as Renka and Kan Cho'un had.

Shohi would guide his country. Heaven couldn't do it for him. He expected nothing from Heaven. Still, he raised his sword to rally his soldiers.

"I have Heaven's blessing! Konkoku has no emperor but me!" he shouted triumphantly.

Heaven's blessing. It was a convenient concept, so he decided to make use of it.

The emperor pointed his sword at the heavens and looked up.

You've decided on me, have you, Quinary Dragon? If you've decided, well then...

"Quinary Dragon! Show the world you favor me!" he commanded, almost in challenge.

"For His Majesty!" the soldiers roared in response. They threw themselves against the enemy with unbelievable force.

The front lines were slowly advancing.

They're reinvigorated.

Suddenly, the hopeless situation seemed to have been given new life.

We're going to break through!

The soldiers were exuberant, and their renewed spirits brought explosive

power. The front lines, which had seemed on the verge of collapse, began to force the enemy back. Shohi was convinced they would break the enemy's lines.

We're winning!

"Go! Push! I will guide and protect our empire!" Shohi roared, his blood boiling with excitement.

The soldiers bellowed in response. In a single push, they forced the enemy back a hundred paces.

Suddenly, a cold wind blew from behind them.

Rimi looked up at the sky.

"Your Majesty! It's..." she gasped.

Jotetsu looked up at the sky as well. His eyes widened.

"What the hell..." he mumbled.

Shohi couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"It can't be..."

"Tama!" Rimi shouted to the sky, tears welling in her eyes.

III

The sky rumbled.

A number of soldiers noticed the sound and looked up at the gray sky.

The rumbling grew louder. The wind whistled. It was like something in the sky was growling.

The growling became a roar that seemed to blanket the entire battlefield. The soldiers all froze and hunched, as if the sound was coming to crush them. Swordsmen in mid-duel jumped away from each other to look at the sky. Instantly, the angry shouts of battle faded. Amidst the swirl of dust and fog, combatants looked around uneasily.

Curious unrest was spreading.

One soldier shouted and pointed at the sky. Others looked to see what he was pointing at. Some gasped while others shrieked.

The soldier was pointing at the young emperor, who was clad in armor and astride his black horse. Blood poured from one of his legs, and his armor was stained with blood and dust. He had a young woman in one arm and held a sword aloft with the other. He almost seemed to be wreathed in light.

And behind him, a massive creature coiled in the sky. It had flowing silver fur and long white horns. It stared down at the battlefield with immense blue eyes. Each of its massive paws, big enough to hold a human, bore five long, sharp claws. One of the paws clutched pearly stones.

“It’s the Quinary Dragon!” someone shouted.

Every soldier on the battlefield, imperial and Ho alike, froze. The unbelievable sight had left everyone dumbstruck.

“Don’t let them through!” the chief general had been ordering while waving his sword before he caught sight of the dragon, which caused him to freeze in place.

The Minister of Justice squeezed his reins tightly and trembled.

“Oh,” Shusei murmured, half in a daze as he gazed at the massive, silver creature.

Renka sat utterly still, her eyes widening. Rihan was simply dumbfounded.

Kojin trembled, but not out of fear. He seemed barely able to hold back the surge of emotion.

“Heaven has...” the chancellor trailed off.

The Quinary Dragon opened its maw and unleashed an earthshaking roar. As it did, a wind whipped up, one so strong that no one could keep their eyes open. The soldiers shrieked and crouched down where they stood. All of the horses squealed, petrified with fear.

Shohi wasn’t able to keep his eyes open either. He held Rimi tight and

huddled against his horse to withstand the gale.

Soldiers caught in the blast of wind staggered and screamed. The horses wailed in fear, but the wind was the only thing anyone could hear as it blew so strongly.

Finally, the wind died.

Through Shohi's clenched eyelids, the world seemed harshly bright. When he opened his eyes, the emperor was stunned.

The Quinary Dragon had vanished. So too had the overflowing mist coming off of the Red River. It had all been cleared away, and now, the morning sun shone brightly. The sky was so clear, Shohi could see the Red River.

The Ho forces were tightly massed all the way to the river's banks. There were so many of them that the emperor's forces never had a chance of breaking through.

However.

Beyond the enemy forces, floating down the Red River, were five massive, unfamiliar warships. The ships were imposing, ironclad vessels, but their bows were engraved with elaborate glass carvings and carried figureheads of a goddess wrapped in soft fabric. They were foreign ships, and their design was one Shohi knew.

"Saisakoku," Shohi mumbled unconsciously.

The warships were outfitted with ballistae that took three men to operate. The Saisakokuan soldiers aimed their weapons at the riverbank.

At the center of the Saisakokuan fleet, aboard a particularly large ship that seemed to be the flagship, stood a slender man in elaborately embroidered clothes. With the mist gone and the sun shining, his glittering silver earrings stood out against his dark skin.

He was the brother of the Saisakokuan emperor, ambassador to Konkoku, Gulzari Shar.

"Saisakoku made it in time?" Rimi murmured, awestruck.

Jotetsu shook his head. He didn't seem to believe what he was seeing.

“No. That’s impossible. There’s no way they could’ve arrived today. They shouldn’t be here until days from now at the earliest,” the spy said.

Shohi thought the same thing. There was no way Saisakoku could be here. Kojin had been certain they wouldn’t make it in time.

The Saisakokuan reinforcements couldn’t be here. But then, what am I looking at?

It was like some overly hopeful delusion.

Shar raised his hand, and all the ships began firing in unison.

Ballista bolts streaked through the air and landed throughout the Ho forces. The thick, powerful bolts pierced soldiers one after another, with each shot taking down five or six men. The shots came endlessly and seamlessly, throwing the Ho forces into a panic as they scrambled for safety.

But when the enemy troops raced to escape the ships firing behind them, they were easily cut down as they rushed into the emperor’s forces.

Realizing this, Shohi shouted out an order.

“Meet any fleeing enemies with your blades!”

The soldiers didn’t know what was happening, but as if suddenly awakened from a dream, they raised a battle cry. They cut down fleeing cavalry and speared fleeing footmen. And while carnage unfolded on the front lines, the rain of bolts from the warships continued.

A storm of bolts from behind and the emperor’s men in front. Trapped between those two options, the Ho soldiers fell into utter disarray. The enemy troops, who had once seemed so formidable, fell in droves, blanketing the ground with corpses. Their dense formation, which had blocked the emperor’s path so effectively before, was now their ruin. It multiplied the effectiveness of the ballistae and made fleeing that much harder.



“I can’t believe it...” Shusei muttered as he watched the Saisakokuan ships, which had suddenly appeared when the fog had lifted.

With the foreign ships raining ballista bolts from the rear and the emperor’s

men engaging from the front, the densely concentrated Ho formation fell into chaos. Their enemy was quickly crushing them from both sides.

Shusei and the Minister of Justice sat side by side on horses atop a small ridge some distance from the front lines. From there, they could see their soldiers flailing and dying, like a rice field being reaped. The emperor's forces were the sickle, steadily advancing and mowing through them.

The minister and Shusei had both seen the appearance of the Quinary Dragon. They had also needed to shield their eyes from the wind. When they'd opened their eyes once more, they were shocked to find the mist gone.

It wasn't long before they noticed the surprising appearance of the Saisakokuan ships. Before the soldiers could even realize what was happening, the attack had begun.

The Minister of Justice clutched Shusei's sleeve.

"Lord Ho! What do we do?! Do you have a plan?!" he asked.

"There's nothing we can do," Shusei responded as he idly watched soldiers being mowed down. "It's over."

"What are you talking about?! We should pull back, regroup, and counterattack!" the minister urged.

Shusei pointed at the battlefield.

"Just look, minister. Our forces are being annihilated. We won't have any soldiers to regroup."

"What about the six thousand men around the palace?!"

"Those men were hired for a fixed term. They won't follow the Ho House into battle if we're losing."

"Then give them more money!"

Shusei suddenly gave the minister a hopeless smile.

"We already used all of my house's funds to hire those men."

The blood ran from the minister's face.

Just then, as if to pour salt on the wound, a dirty, bloodied cavalryman came

riding up. He pulled on his reins, trying to bring his agitated horse to a halt.

“The chief general has been shot! With nobody to control the men, we are in disarray! Who should take command?!” the soldier asked.

“I don’t think it would matter who takes command at this point. Tell the men to flee,” Shusei replied.

“We’re giving up?!” the soldier asked, eyes wide in shock at the scholar’s calm tone.

“You can tell as well as I can, can’t you? We don’t need any more senseless deaths,” Shusei responded.

“Understood,” the soldier said with a scowl before driving his horse back toward the battlefield.

“Let’s get out of here, Lord Ho. If they catch you, your life is forfeit,” the minister said with a trembling voice.

“If you want to run, then run. I’m staying here.”

“Why?!”

“These men are dying because of me. It is my duty to stay and see it out, don’t you think? Besides, for those guilty of high treason, there is nowhere we can run where we won’t be found. Running is useless.”

“Well, I don’t want to die!” the minister shrieked and kicked his horse.

People nearby ran after the minister, and those around Shusei exchanged glances and shortly started fleeing too.

Shusei paid them no mind. He simply continued watching the battle.

“It’s tragic,” the scholar mumbled. He closed his eyes and bit his lip. “Forgive me. But killing you all was my goal.”



The decimated Ho army fell into a disorderly retreat. As the enemy scattered, the emperor’s men gave chase and mercilessly cut them down.

Kojin, Rihan, and Renka charged through the chaotic battlefield to join Shohi. Rimi had her face buried in the emperor’s chest to hide from the carnage.

It's awful.

Rimi knew that war was about killing, but she couldn't stand the gruesome, bloody sight of soldiers being slain one after another.

While she couldn't see it, the cool river air on her neck told Rimi that Shohi was riding for the riverbanks while Jotetsu and the others protected him.

"You can look now, Rimi. The battlefield is behind us," Shohi whispered.

Rimi timidly raised her face.

Kojin was to their left while Renka and Rihan were to their right with Jotetsu behind them. All of them were mounted on horseback and caked in dust, and Shohi and Jotetsu were both bleeding. There were no signs of soldiers anywhere along the river.

A barge ferried Gulzari Shar from the Saisakokuan flagship to the riverbank. He was closely guarded by six Saisakokuan soldiers. The Minister of Works, who'd gone to seek the prince's aid, followed behind.

Shohi dismounted his horse, but the moment his feet touched the ground, his legs gave out and he collapsed to his knees.

"Your Majesty!" Rimi cried, jumping down to support the emperor. He looked pale, and his face was contorted in pain. "You're wounded. We need to get you to a doctor."

"After I thank Prince Shar," Shohi replied.

"I've got him," Jotetsu croaked, climbing down from his horse to hold Shohi upright. He gave the worried Rimi a wink. "Just leave him to me. It wouldn't be a good look for His Majesty to be held up by a delicate little thing like you."

"Okay," Rimi said. She let go of Shohi but stayed close to his side, still concerned for his well-being.

The emperor tried to look as dignified as he could while being propped up by Jotetsu.

He's bled so much...

There was so much blood on Shohi's legs that it was hard to tell if the

bleeding had even stopped. Rimi couldn't keep from thinking about getting him to a doctor.

Suddenly, a cold wind tugged at the consort's skirt.

Huh?

Rimi was surprised by the breeze. It was coming from a different direction than the river.

What is that?

Kojin and the ministers dismounted as well to greet Shar.

"It seems I made it in time." Shar greeted them with a soft, relaxed smile.

"You have my deepest gratitude, Prince Shar. If not for your arrival...I don't think we'd be standing here," Shohi said.

"Please, none of that, Your Majesty. It won't do for the emperor to say such things," Shar discounted with a wave.

"But—"

"Saisakoku simply saw an opportunity to secure ties with you and your country, and we took advantage of it. That's all."

"Prince Shar, I, and Konkoku, would like the same..." Shohi started to say, choking on his words as his eyes misted up.

The emperor was likely overwhelmed with gratitude and relief. Shar seemed to sense it as he placed a reassuring hand on the man's shoulder.

"I'm glad I was able to save you," Shar said.

Shohi opened his mouth a few times, seemingly trying to respond, but he was apparently too overwhelmed. He would likely start weeping if he tried to speak.

"You're terribly wounded. Your servants and your adorable little mouse seem quite worried about you," the prince said.

"Mouse?" Shohi asked in confusion.

"The white mouse at your feet. It's your pet, isn't it?"

Shohi looked down, as did everyone around him. Rimi clapped her hands over

her mouth and resisted the overwhelming urge to shout.

Tama!

The little, white-furred dragon was sitting at Shohi's feet, looking up at him with adoration and concern for her master in her blue eyes.

"You've been recognized by Heaven..." Kojin murmured.

"Quinary Dragon..." Shohi said in a thin, trembling voice. Tama squeaked in response, crawled up to his shoulder, and nuzzled his cheek.

"Thank you, Quinary Dragon," Shohi said, petting the divine creature's back. His eyes were squeezed shut, seemingly overcome by emotion.

When Tama was done nuzzling Shohi, she looked at Rimi. It felt like there was a smile in her big blue eyes. The dragon seemed happy and relaxed on Shohi's shoulder.

She seems more comfortable there than she does on my shoulder.

Tama's time on Rimi's shoulder and under her skirt had always been temporary. The dragon had found her place in the world.

I'm happy for you, Tama. You've found your master. That's where you belong.

Happy tears welled in Rimi's eyes.



Fall, 103rd year of Konkoku's history.

Lord Ho Shusei had raised the banner of war in hopes of forcing Ryu Shohi, fifth emperor of Konkoku, to abdicate. However, with the aid of the prefectural armies and Saisakoku, the emperor crushed the rebellion.

The Chief General of the Imperial Army lost his life in the ensuing battle. The Minister of Justice fled but was quickly pursued. When the minister found himself cornered, he threw himself off a cliff before he could be apprehended.

Ho Neison, former lord of the Ho House, poisoned himself upon learning of the defeat.

Ho Shusei, the mastermind behind the insurrection, was captured immediately after the battle and taken to the imperial palace where he would face the emperor's judgment.

All other officials who participated in the uprising or listed their names on the Letter of Compact were purged from office. Chancellor Shu Kojin was relentless in prosecuting them, leading to a sharp reduction in the number of available bureaucrats. Most of the offending bureaucrats came from noble families. To replace them, provincial officials working beneath the prefectural administrators were called upon. Chancellor Shu also moved forward the examinations for new bureaucrats so a large number of exceptional citizens could be recruited.

As a result of the rebellion, the Ho House, which had previously sat equally with the Ryu House, was stripped of its royal status. The entire house was relocated to the remote northern prefecture of Kyo. The Ho House had been effectively dismantled.

This war came to be called the Ho Rebellion.

With the Ho Rebellion stopped, Shohi, Kojin, and the ministers worked tirelessly. It would be three months before politics and life around the palace returned to normal.

Fall had passed, and the first flakes of snow were beginning to fall.

There was one final duty to carry out before the emperor could officially announce that the Ho Rebellion was a thing of the past: the execution of the insurrectionist, Lord Ho Shusei.

Chapter 3: Explaining the Inexplicable

I

“Wow, I knew it felt cold! It’s snowing, dearest!” Yo exclaimed as she stepped out of the Palace of Northern Peaks into the garden. White flakes were beginning to fall from the gray, thinly clouded sky.

Rimi came racing after Yo to put a tan fur coat around her fellow consort’s shoulders.

“Put this on, Yo!”

“I’m fine! I’m not going to stay out here long,” Yo argued.

“Still, you can’t go out wearing so little!”

“Fiiiine,” Yo said with a laugh and clung to Rimi’s arm.

“You seem in good spirits, Yo.”

“You came all the way from the Palace of the Water Spirit to bring treats! Why wouldn’t I be? And His Majesty is even coming to see us. It’s been so long!”

“That’s true,” Rimi replied. “It’s going to be the first time he’s visited the rear palace since the Ho Rebellion ended. I haven’t seen him in some time either.”

Rimi and Yo stood and looked up silently at the falling snow. Even Yo, always the noisy one, was able to be silent for a moment. That, more than anything, made Rimi feel as if they’d truly found a time of peace.

The snow is so beautiful and gentle. The events of three months ago feel like a distant dream now.

There were times when Rimi would remember the dread and anxiety of the war. She would begin to shake so uncontrollably, it was practically spasms. But being able to have a calm moment like this made it all seem like an old nightmare. She was sure that after some years, the fear would have fewer

opportunities to resurface.

Shohi and his council had been working tirelessly to resolve the aftermath of the war so the people could heal and move on. They couldn't ignore the fact that the war had happened, but they could help ease people's hearts by putting the government in order, restoring the palace, and reorganizing the Imperial Guard. When that was done, they would be able to call the insurrection a thing of the past.

But to do that, there was one more necessary duty.

The execution of Lord Ho.

Ho Shusei, lord of the Ho House, was currently being held in a cell within the imperial palace.

Rimi hadn't seen him once since his imprisonment. If she'd really wanted to, she probably would've been able to meet with him. But she was scared. She didn't think she had the bravery to meet with the heartless monster that had murdered her sweet cuisinologist.

Shusei is dead. The man I want to see isn't here anymore.

Her heart churned with a combination of sadness, pain, and anger. The turmoil within her had led her to cut ties with Lord Ho, thinking of him as an entirely different person, and that turmoil wouldn't fade after a scant few months.

"You two are going to make yourselves sick," someone called. Rimi and Yo both whipped around in surprise at the voice.

It was Shohi, crossing a red bridge over a pond. He wore a black fur coat over his deep-purple robe. A little silver creature sat snugly beneath the fur as well.

Since the end of the Ho Rebellion, Tama had decided she was right at home on the emperor's shoulder. When the mood struck her, she would show up at the Palace of the Water Spirit to beg Rimi for food, but otherwise, she stayed with Shohi.

While it made Rimi a bit sad, she was happy that Tama was finally where she belonged. And when she remembered the way the dragon had appeared above

Shohi's head, she truly felt that such an awesome being didn't belong with a mere palace woman.

Why did she end up sticking with me for so long anyway?

Perhaps it had just been somewhere to stay until the dragon could decide who was fit to be emperor. But why Rimi of all people?

I always supposed it was because I fed her, but...

After Rimi had seen her true nature as the Quinary Dragon when she'd blown the mist away, that thought seemed absurd. There had to be a reason the dragon had stayed with her, but Rimi still had no idea what it was.

So, On, and Ho followed Shohi. Hakurei was last in the procession. Shohi had a slight limp, likely a result of his injury from the war, but the doctor had said he would likely be moving normally again in a year or so.

"Your Majesty!" Yo cried, jumping into the air before racing over to the emperor. "You're early!"

"I finally found myself with a bit of free time this morning. What are you doing out in the cold like this?" Shohi asked.

"It was so cold, I was hoping we might see some snow, and sure enough! It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"What are you, a puppy excited by the snow?" So asked as Yo frolicked around. She pulled her white fur coat tighter around her shoulders. "I feel like this cold is going to kill me. Can't we go inside?"

"I think the snow has a charm of its own," On chimed in, looking up as she placed her hands on the chest of her gray fur coat.

Ho, clad in black fur, clapped her hands in the air. She grinned, seeing she'd caught a snowflake.

"Indeed. It's gentle, cold, and beautiful," she said.

"If you insist. Apparently, I'm the only one who can't appreciate its charm. It may be beautiful, but it's cold, and I'm dainty," So commented, turning up her nose.

“Yes, I suppose you are,” Shohi replied with an awkward smile.

Seeing the four consorts so happy with the emperor made Rimi feel warm. Their exchange seemed to put Shohi at ease as well. Content with how things were going, Rimi went over to Hakurei, who was standing a ways behind.

“Master Hakurei, how are you feeling?” she asked.

The eunuch, who’d suffered the effects of a nerve poison, always had some numbness in his hands and feet, and he’d mentioned some days before that they hurt when it got too cold.

“I’m fine, thank you. My body is a mess, but there’s nothing to be done about it,” he said with a gentle look in his amber eyes. “I’m more concerned that we haven’t managed to settle things yet.”

“What do you mean?” Rimi asked.

“There are things that none of us have been able to make sense of, not even His Majesty or the chancellor. I feel like we just don’t understand the truth behind the Ho Rebellion yet.”

“Oh my,” Rimi said, tilting her head in concern.

“You spoke with Prince Shar before he returned home, didn’t you? What did he say about the reinforcements?” Hakurei asked.

“He said he was responding to a letter from His Majesty that had been delivered by the Minister of Works.”

After the war had ended, Gulzari Shar had stayed a full ten days to give his crew and soldiers time to rest and restock before their return. In the meantime, he had met with Shohi and Kojin several times and participated in a celebratory feast. Rimi had also gone to the feast and thanked him in person.

“No thanks necessary,” he’d said with a wave of his hand and his usual calm, unflappable smile. *“We have our own motives for establishing trade with Konkoku.”*

When he’d left for Saisakoku, he said he’d bring Aisha with him next time.

“Do you find something odd about Prince Shar bringing reinforcements?” Rimi asked.

“The math doesn’t add up.”

After thinking for a moment, Rimi understood.

“It would take three or four days for the minister to reach Saisakoku. To get their ships ready and set out, they couldn’t have made it in time. But then...” Rimi looked up at Hakurei. “But then, why were they there that day?”

“That’s what none of us can explain. All Shar will say is that he responded to the request brought by the Minister of Works. I was hoping he’d let something slip to you, but it seems you heard the same thing.”

Since Shar had appeared to save Shohi, it was hard to imagine that Saisakoku’s strange movements represented any sort of threat, but the inexplicable nature of things left Rimi with an uneasy feeling.

Why was Saisakoku there that day?

A cold flake of snow made Rimi unconsciously place a hand on her cheek. She was surprised by how cold her skin was.

“Rimi, do you have any treats for us?” Shohi asked, turning from his conversation with the four consorts to face her.

“Yes, I do!” Rimi said, suddenly looking up. “I stewed and sweetened some lotus seeds and mixed them with warm, sticky agar and honey.”

“I love lotus seeds! Let’s get inside and eat!” Yo exclaimed as she tugged So’s hand.

“Oh good. Something warm,” So said with a relieved sigh.

As the four consorts cheerfully headed inside, Shohi stepped over to Rimi.

“Can I leave the serving to you, Rimi?” he asked.

“But of course,” Rimi said with a smile and nod. She then reached over to stroke Tama’s head on Shohi’s shoulder, earning a happy coo from the dragon. “And hello, Tama! It’s been too long.”

“I told you I’d figure out what to do about your position after the war, but dealing with the aftermath has made me postpone things. I’m sorry for leaving you in a situation like this,” Shohi apologized.

“I don’t mind. Take your time. I’ve been enjoying spending my days at the Palace of the Water Spirit and entertaining the four consorts.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And I’m sure you’re curious about Shusei since there’s been no news regarding him.”

At the mention of Shusei’s name, Rimi flinched.

“Is he to be executed?” Hakurei asked pointedly.

“There is no other option. The execution will be carried out in three days,” Shohi explained. “The month of Shé ends in two days, so it will take place on the first of Lu. It’s considered auspicious to hold executions on the first of the month. We will finally be able to declare the matter of the Ho Rebellion closed and put the people’s minds at ease.”

Three days. I can’t believe it’s so soon.

Rimi received the news with a heavy heart. She knew it was the obvious decision. For a moment, Shusei’s kind smile flashed through her mind, and she felt a tight pain in the pit of her stomach. She wasn’t sure if the feeling was born from fear, happiness, or sadness.

Shohi had mentioned he could tell what Rimi was thinking about. She didn’t want to leave his concern unacknowledged, so she asked a single question.

“How is Lord Ho?”

“He’s been very quiet,” Shohi replied with a frown. From atop his shoulder, Tama looked at the emperor with worried blue eyes. “He’s been spending all his time reading. I’ve gone to see him, but even if I berate the man, he just remains silent. It feels like I’m looking at the old Shusei.”

“The old Shusei.” The words made Rimi’s fingers tremble.

“Does he really remind you of the old Shusei?” Rimi asked fearfully.

“He does. He’s so quiet and gentle.”

“No matter how he seems, you can’t let yourself pity him,” Hakurei cut in immediately.

“I know that. If we don’t hold a large public execution, we can’t actually

declare the rebellion over. It's my duty as emperor."

Shohi seemed like he was enduring terrible pain. He was surely feeling hesitation toward the execution.

Meeting with Lord Ho has shaken His Majesty's heart.

Lord Ho may have driven Shohi to the brink, but seeing him quietly reading like the old Shusei must have been painful. The emperor loved Shusei and never found it in himself to hate the man despite his betrayal.

But as Hakurei said, they could not afford to pity this man no matter how docile he seemed. He had betrayed the emperor's trust and started a war. He could bare his fangs again at any time. Besides, an emperor couldn't take pity on someone who had caused so much harm. Half-measures would just earn people's disdain. There could be no leniency here.

Rimi took Shohi's hand. She stroked it and smiled at him, hoping to console the emperor.

"Let's go, Your Majesty. Warm sweets are waiting for you," she told him.

Shohi's expression finally softened.

"Yes, you're right," he said.

"Director Sai?" a eunuch called, pacing quickly for the director from the garden's gate. When he reached Hakurei, he handed him a letter. "I have a letter addressed to Lady Setsu Rimi."

"Thank you. Who is it from?" Hakurei asked.

"Chancellor Shu," the eunuch responded.

"Chancellor Shu?" Rimi echoed, eyes going wide.

"A letter from Kojin? About what?" Shohi asked quizzically.

"I have no idea," Rimi said, shaking her head in confusion.

Hakurei took the letter and handed it to Rimi with a curious expression.

"You'll have to open it," he said.

Rimi did and was met with Kojin's sharp, precise handwriting. The message

itself was incredibly straightforward.

“What does Kojin want?” Shohi asked.

“He’s ordered me to come to the Hall of Law and Culture tomorrow.”

II

Guard stations tightly hugged the southern palace wall that held the main gate. Tucked away amidst the reddish-brown buildings were the palace’s holding cells.

Through a wooden door and down a cramped corridor, the path split. To the left, there was housing for guards and a simple kitchen. To the right, three cells with iron-barred doors lined each side of the hall. At the end of the hall, a stone staircase led underground. There, a short hallway led to five more cells, two on each side and one at the end of the hall. The cells were furnished with a simple bed, a table, and a chair.

The prison was currently occupied by two prisoners. The first was Jin Keiyu, former Minister of Rites. He was held in one of the inner cells in the aboveground area. The second was Ho Shusei, lord of the Ho House. He was held in the farthest cell in the underground area.

With a chilly, dry gust of wind and a billow of dust, Shin Jotetsu barreled through the prison entrance with hunched shoulders, shivering from the cold. It was even colder inside than it was outside. The guard stations were equipped with braziers, but the prison had no obvious signs of fire.

“I’m heading in for a minute,” Jotetsu called to the guards before going down the cell-lined passage.

Jotetsu stole a glance through the bars of a cell and saw Jin Keiyu lying on his bed with his back to the door. The disgraced minister was surely aware of his presence but appeared to be ignoring him.

That guy turns my stomach.

More than the knowledge that Keiyu had been working in secret as Mars, it was the man’s incomprehensible motives that made him so disgusting and

unnerving.

As Jotetsu reached the bottom of the stone steps, he noticed a faint light at the end of the hallway. A slender candle flickered within the far cell. Shusei was within, sitting on his chair and reading at the table. He looked up at the sound of Jotetsu's footsteps.

The prison was always cold as prisoners were given nothing to warm themselves with, but they were allowed a few minor concessions like bedding, candles, and books upon request. While Shusei was a prisoner, he was also lord of the Ho House. Providing him with the bare necessities needed to maintain his dignity was a matter of recognizing his position. Failing to do so would make his captors seem like the indecent ones.

Jotetsu locked eyes with Shusei through the bars as he approached.

"Hey, Shusei. Still have your nose stuck in a book, eh?"

It was the first time the spy had visited in ten days. The last time he'd come, he had simply waited silently with the emperor.

During that same visit, Shohi had met with Shusei for the first time since the end of the insurrection. Other matters had been so pressing that he hadn't had the time before then. The emperor had come ready to shout and hurl insults, but the moment he saw the state of Shusei, he seemed demoralized. It didn't keep him from shouting at his old friend, but Shusei just sat and nodded silently.

His Majesty looked so frustrated.

Perhaps feeling foolish, Shohi had left soon after that. The exchange had been very short.

"What do you need, Jotetsu?" Shusei asked, softly closing his book and placing it on the table.

"I came to let you know that you're going to be executed in three days."

"I see. I suppose I won't be able to finish half of these," Shusei replied dispassionately, laying his hand on the heap of books that had been piled on the table.

Jotetsu balled his fist.

“I agree with His Majesty’s decision to execute you,” the spy commented. “I think it’s the right decision.”

“It is,” Shusei said with a matter-of-fact nod.

Jotetsu glared through the bars. His next words came through gritted teeth.

“Shusei... I’m willing to let you go.”

The scholar looked up in astonishment.

“If you want, I’ll get you out of here. Leave Konkoku, go to the Southern Trinity, go to Saisakoku, go wherever.”

“Didn’t you just say you approved of my execution?” Shusei asked.

“I do. I think His Majesty made the right decision. It’s necessary for him as emperor. I completely agree with it. But I don’t want to let you die. So if you want me to...”

“That’s insane, Jotetsu.”

“I know it’s insane. I don’t care. Is that wrong?”

“How am I supposed to answer that?” Shusei asked, looking aghast at Jotetsu’s confrontational attitude.

“When the palace was besieged, someone who I’m assuming was a spy left a message for me,” Jotetsu explained. “The message said that the Ho House had an informant close to His Majesty. And I knew immediately who’d ordered that I get such a message. The writer tried to hide their handwriting, but when you spend more than a decade with a person, it makes you hard to fool. That’s why I knew I could trust it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Shusei said, averting his eyes with a blank expression. Jotetsu didn’t care, of course. He never expected the man to simply confess.

“C’mon. All you have to do is ask, Shusei.”

“I’ll wait out my time here. It’s just three more days. It will actually be nice to have some closure.”

“You’re fine with this?!” Jotetsu shouted, grabbing the cell’s bars and shaking them.

“I am.”

“Then you’re an idiot!”

“I don’t think I’m an idiot. My ambitions were a bit foolish, perhaps,” Shusei answered with a smile.

Jotetsu didn’t know what to say in the face of that smile. He bit his lip.

He can’t really be satisfied with this?

The spy was unwilling to let things unfold like this, but he knew Shusei too well.

He might have that gentle smile, but he’ll be stubborn to his final moments. Been like that ever since we were kids.

Once Shusei decided on something, he never stopped halfway. The man saw everything out to the very end.



Minister of Revenue To Rihan sighed.

“Is there something about my office that attracts rude people?” he grumbled.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Minister of Personnel Ryo Renka replied. She was sitting on a sofa beneath a round window in the Minister of Revenue’s office, puffing on her tobacco pipe with her legs splayed as if the room was her own.

Rihan opened the window to clear the air. The lingering smoke was quickly driven away by the wind.

“Keiyu liked to come barge in here all the time too,” Rihan explained.

“Ah, I see. Knowing him, he must’ve been spectacularly rude.”

“So, what is it you want, Minister Ryo? What’s so important you had to wait for me here?” Rihan asked, crossing his arms and glowering, causing the scar beneath his right eye to twist.

Renka exhaled a puff of smoke, pulled her hair into a haphazard bundle, and

began digging around in her pocket. She produced a small black vial, which she raised into the air.

“I came to give you this,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Poison. A potent one. Three drops and you’re off to the next world.”

“And why are you giving it to me?” Rihan asked, his face contorting with disgust.

“Because you’re going to give it to our rude friend, Jin Keiyu,” Renka explained. “His Majesty and Kojin have discussed the matter, and they decided this was to be his punishment. If he’s formally accused of a crime and his actions come to light, it’ll harm the Jin House. They would never be able to participate in politics again. But the Jins have a long history of producing excellent bureaucrats. It would be a tragedy if that came to an end.”

Scattered flakes of snow were falling outside, and the breeze brought some of them inside. Rihan looked out at the shriveled maples, which seemed like they were recoiling away from the cold.

“I see. His crimes won’t be made public, but he can’t be allowed to live,” the Minister of Revenue said dispassionately. “So we force him to take it and talk our way out of the aftermath with a convenient excuse?”

“They decided that was the right course of action because he didn’t have a political objective. If he’d been doing things out of some sort of ideology, we would have to publicly execute him as a lesson to anyone sharing that ideology and to make it clear that we are in control.”

“But it turned out the man was an idiot. He didn’t have an ideology or objective. He was just following some bizarre sort of desire,” Rihan said as he took the vial.

Renka stood and shrugged.

“Not that it would make things better if he had been,” she said.

“They chose not to invite me to the discussion about Keiyu’s punishment, didn’t they?”

Renka, who'd been heading for the door, stopped and turned around.

"You're too close to Keiyu. You might have tried to push for a lighter sentence. Or maybe gone the other direction and made it too harsh. But the job of making him take it falls to you. Do your duty. As his friend."

Rihan squeezed the vial in his fist and nodded gravely.

"I understand. When does it need to be done?"

"It doesn't matter when, as long as he makes up his mind to do it. But Lord Ho's execution is taking place in three days. If you can have it done before then, well...better for everyone."

After Renka departed, Rihan gazed at the vial in his palm for a while.

Best to take care of it quickly.

Though it was only evening, with the thick snow clouds blanketing the sky, it was terribly dark.

"I'm going out for a bit," Rihan announced as he passed his vice minister on the way to the prison.

Rihan had known that Keiyu was imprisoned, but the thought of seeing the man's face made him so angry that he'd avoided going until now. When he reached the prison, he announced his arrival to the guard and went to the cell where Keiyu was being held.

Wind blew through cracks in the brick walls, leaving the stone prison cell horribly cold. When Rihan came to the darkened cell, he found Keiyu lounging on his bed with one knee raised.

"It's been far too long, Rihan. You don't have to be so cold, you know," Keiyu said, looking over at Rihan. He wore his characteristic grin, but his cheeks were sunken, and he looked thinner. Still, the impudent, irreverent gleam hadn't left his eyes.

The sight filled Rihan with something akin to frustration. How could Jin Keiyu have been reduced to this?

I don't want to see him like this.

The gruff minister silently reached through the bars and placed the black vial on the stone floor.

“Drink this,” he ordered.

“Poison, I’m guessing?” Keiyu asked. His smile deepened. “Apparently, they’ve decided it’s too much effort to drag me out and cut my head off.”

“It’s His Majesty and Chancellor Shu’s way of showing compassion. They’re making sure no harm comes to the Jin House,” Rihan explained. “Only the people close to His Majesty were there when you were arrested, and few people know it even happened. Nobody here in the prison even knows your identity.”

At first, Keiyu snorted. Then he suddenly burst into raucous laughter.

“Stop it,” Rihan ordered with a scowl. “Why are you laughing?”

“Such kindness! Oh dear, I’m overwhelmed!” Keiyu exclaimed. Eventually, the laughing stopped, but his face remained twisted in a grin. “You think I’m going to drink that for the good of the Jin House? Put me in public and cut my head off. I’ll tell the whole world I rebelled against the emperor as a member of the Jin House. Let the Jins disappear with me.”

“His Majesty is showing you compassion!”

“Tell His Majesty to mind his own filthy business,” Keiyu declared. He rolled over in his bed, turning his back to Rihan.

“Keiyu, you damned fool!” Rihan shouted, but his fellow minister showed no sign of responding. Rihan’s voice dropped to a grumble. “What are you thinking, Keiyu? I can’t make any sense of how your mind works.”

Keiyu still didn’t respond.

I’ve never been able to tell what’s going on in his head. We’ve been together since we were students, yet I’ve never been able to understand a thing about him.

Keiyu had always been a flippant, irreverent man with a permanent grin. It was the only side of himself that he ever showed. Thinking back, he’d never really shown what he was feeling. While Rihan would sometimes get angry,

Keiyu only ever smiled. No sadness, no rage. He never expressed a negative emotion.

This is the first time I've ever seen him express his feelings this much.

Rihan stared at the vial of poison sitting on the stone floor, at a loss over what to do.

How am I going to make him take it?

The minister didn't want to hold Keiyu down, pinch his nose, and force him to swallow it. He deserved to die with a semblance of dignity as the man who'd stood at Rihan's side as Minister of Rites.

III

After departing the rear palace, Shohi returned to his chambers. It was the first time in a while that he was able to spend some time there. He had a servant bring tea and poured some for the Quinary Dragon as well. The dragon stuck its head into the teacup, blew on the tea to cool it, and began to happily lap the liquid up.

Shohi sat for a while, watching the dragon drink. Jotetsu didn't seem to be around, and while the emperor wondered where he might be, the Hall of the Rising Dragon was safe, so he didn't pay it much mind.

Three days.

They had set the date for Shusei's execution the night before.

The lord of the Ho House needed to be executed so they could declare the insurrection officially ended. They couldn't afford to delay it either.

Kojin looked stoic, but he couldn't possibly be so calm about things.

The man had personally decided the day his son, whom he'd loved and raised, would die. Shohi knew he was distraught because Kojin had made it clear he would not be present at the execution. A criminal had committed grave crimes against the empire, and as the highest bureaucrat in the empire, it was important for the chancellor to be present for the execution. But Kojin had firmly refused. In the end, they decided to have To Rihan, Minister of Revenue,

stand in his place.

I don't even know how to put my feelings into words.

The Shusei currently sitting in a cell was the gentle young man he'd known so well. Though he hadn't said a word, Shohi could recognize his tender expression and the conflicted look in his eyes.

It was like a terrible spirit had been purged from his old friend. Shohi genuinely wondered if Shusei had been possessed.

But no, he was certain that Shusei had stood against the emperor of his own free will. When asked if he had truly been trying to force Shohi from the throne, he'd silently nodded.

The anger Shohi held at being harried for so long hadn't faded, but he suddenly began to wonder if killing Shusei was absolutely necessary. Perhaps it would be enough to have him exiled or imprisoned in a remote fortress.

But as emperor, Shohi needed to deliver a harsh punishment. There could be no leniency for insurrectionists. Shusei's execution would tell the people that the chaos had ended, and the emperor's reign remained unshaken.

And so, Shohi chose to make the imperial decision.

He hadn't managed to sleep at all the night before. The war raging in Shohi's heart between his love for his friend and his duty as an emperor kept him awake. Yet for some reason, he still didn't feel sleepy. He doubted he'd sleep tonight either.

"I wonder if Rimi could help," Shohi mumbled to himself.

Even on the eve of war, he felt at ease when she was in his bed for some reason. She was surely shaken over the matter with Shusei as well. Maybe understanding each other's worries was the reason being with her was so soothing.

I have to decide what to do about Rimi's position as well. What will she be if not the empress? Imperial Hugger? Security Blanket to the Emperor? I doubt those are real positions.

Deciding it was time he went to bed, Shohi stood and called a servant, who

helped him change into a thin sleeping robe and a thicker woolen garment to go over it.

“Quinary Dragon, I’m going to bed. What are you going to do?” Shohi called.

The dragon had been sitting on the table with its back turned, munching away at something for a while. It turned around at the sound of Shohi’s voice, revealing a piece of the geyi that Rimi had made before the war in its front paws.

“Snacking this late at night? You’re going to make yourself fat,” the emperor chided as he approached the table. He picked up one of the little amber fragments.

Shusei’s geyi was more like syrup. You couldn’t pick it up like this.

A sweet aroma filled his nose as he placed the candy in his mouth.

“Your Majesty.”

The kind voice of the cuisinologist rang deep in Shohi’s mind as he bit down. It was frustrating to be reminded of that when it was too late.

“Still just as sweet though.”

The Quinary Dragon climbed up to Shohi’s shoulder. Comforted by its weight, he reached up to pet its silky fur.



Having received a letter from Kojin the night before summoning her to the Hall of Law and Culture, Rimi departed the Palace of the Water Spirit and headed for the imperial palace.

It was a cold morning, and Rimi’s breath came out in white puffs. Piles of snow dotted the interior of the palace. They reflected the morning sun, sparkling in the light and making every corner of the palace seem brighter. The camellias were laden with snow, making their red hues seem more vibrant than ever.

The Hall of Law and Culture served as the chancellor’s office. Rimi had been there once before, but at that time, the entire place had felt heavily guarded. There were no guards outside the gate today. A boy, Kojin’s runner, was waiting

there instead. He quickly showed Rimi inside.

The hall seemed quiet and showed no signs of life. Kojin probably preferred it that way.

The boy led Rimi to a room facing out to a garden. A brazier made the room nice and warm, and the air was rich with the scent of ink. Kojin was writing something at his desk, but upon seeing Rimi's face, he put down his brush and stood.

"Sit, Setsu Rimi," Kojin ordered sternly, pointing at a table in the center of the room. Rimi did as commanded.

What's going on? What possible business could the chancellor have with me?

Shohi and Hakurei had seemed equally perplexed. There was no indication that Kojin was planning on kidnapping her like last time. She wasn't worried about going to the Hall of Law and Culture alone, simply confused. Rimi couldn't think of a single reason he'd need her.

The chancellor picked up a letter from his desk and sat across from Rimi. He slid the letter across the table to her.

"Read this," he ordered.

"Who's it from?" Rimi asked.

"It's not addressed to you. It's a letter from the Mikado of Wakoku, addressed to me."

"A letter from the Mikado?"

Rimi looked down at the letter and recognized the old, familiar characters of Wakokuan script. She wondered why the Mikado, ruler of Wakoku, would contact the chancellor of Konkoku directly and why Kojin wanted her to read it.

Am I supposed to translate? But Chancellor Shu surely knows enough Wakokuan to read it.

Kojin seemed to pick up on Rimi's doubts from her expression. He repeated his command.

"Read."

At his insistence, the consort picked up the letter. It still carried the faint scent of salt from its long sea voyage.

The letter began with a customary seasonal greeting before getting to the point.

“Shu Kojin, Chancellor of Konkoku, I write to you with a heartfelt request,” Rimi read aloud. She wondered what sort of request it might be as her eyes moved to the next passage. “I have learned of a girl related to you by marriage named Setsu Rimi.”

That made the consort jump. Something felt wrong about it.

There's no way the Mikado should know this.

To purge Rimi's history as a Wakokuan, she was given a new identity as Kojin's relative. It should've been impossible for anyone in Wakoku to know about it.

“Chancellor Shu, this letter...” Rimi began, looking up at Kojin. He silently nodded, urging her to continue. Her eyes returned to the page.

“Rumor has reached me that she resembles Ayako, our Umashi-no-Miya who was sent to join Konkoku's rear palace. Ayako once served the Saigu, Wakoku's highest priestess. While the Saigu loved her dearly, she was sent as tribute to His Majesty. However, the Saigu has grown terribly despondent over the loss, such that I cannot bear to look at her.”

Rimi didn't believe it. It didn't matter how sad or upset the Saigu was over Rimi's departure, she would absolutely never let someone see it.

Writing that was a deliberate choice. No person in Wakoku was so rude that they would accuse the Saigu of showing such weakness. The only person who would ever write that would be the Saigu herself.

Could Lady Saigu have written this under the Mikado's name?

The familiarity of the handwriting was what made the thought occur to her. It wasn't the Saigu's writing, but it resembled the style of Fuyutsugu, a priest who often served her. The mixture of joy and nostalgia made Rimi's heart start to pound.

The letter continued.

“Therefore, upon hearing the Konkoku chancellor had a relative who resembles Ayako, I was desperate to contact you with a request. If you are indeed familiar with this girl, Wakoku would very much like to receive Setsu Rimi as a Wakokuan noble.”

Rimi read and reread the letter in astonishment.

What does this mean? Are they telling him to send me back to Wakoku?

It was extremely difficult to believe that anyone would send this letter.

“This is impossible. Nobody in Wakoku should know that I left the rear palace and became your relative. And even if they did find out, the Mikado would never do something so rude as asking to take a tribute back,” Rimi said.

“And yet the reality is that I received a letter bearing his name. When I spoke to the Wakokuan ambassador, I learned the truth. Shusei is behind this.”

“What? Why would he do that?”

Rimi wondered if this was another of Shusei’s plans. Was he trying to sow seeds of chaos now that everyone was relieved the insurrection was over? Joining the unease and panic consuming her mind was confusion over why she was being dragged into this.

“Shusei put this into action during Qi,” Kojin explained.

The month of Qi was when Konkoku opened diplomatic channels with other nations. During the previous Qi, Gulzari Shar and Aisha’s arrival had created quite a stir.

“My son gave a letter to the Wakokuan ambassador who was staying here during Qi. A letter from the lord of the Ho House to the Saigu of Wakoku. The ambassador wasn’t privy to the contents, but he was certain it was delivered to the Saigu,” Kojin explained. “I suspect Shusei informed her of your name and that you were living under the identity of my relative. From there, he likely helped her understand that nothing could be done about Setsu Rimi the consort given as tribute, but Setsu Rimi the chancellor’s relative could be demanded. He probably encouraged her to do it.”

“But why would he?”

“At the time, I was pushing strongly for a marriage between His Majesty and the Saisakokuan princess. You were in the way of that. I’m sure Shusei understood that and wondered what I might do when I began to see you as an obstacle. Even if it wasn’t me, somebody would eventually come to see you that way,” Kojin explained. Thanks to his clear explanation, Rimi was able to understand even through her shock.

“He thought I might be in danger? That’s why he wanted me sent back?”

Kojin nodded.

What did it all mean? Rimi’s mind was spinning in circles.

“It’s inexplicable,” Kojin mumbled to himself. “You know, during the Ho Rebellion, after we left the palace and met with the Ho soldiers, I felt there was something off about their tactics. They knew our position and were deployed in a wide formation. If they had just drawn us in and enveloped us, they could’ve crushed us. Anyone with a shred of understanding would’ve done it.”

Rimi, mind drifting, stared at Kojin as he continued.

“But the Ho forces clumped together and focused entirely on holding us back. That’s exactly why the Saisakokuan assault was so damaging. At the time, I thought Shusei was so sure of his victory that he was doing it to mock us. But no, it turns out that the one in command was the chief general. Apparently, Shusei had given him a single order: don’t let them through. And so he did just that, doing everything in his power to hold us back.”

As Rimi began to understand what Kojin was saying, her fingers trembled.

“Oh...” she murmured after a pause.

The trembling grew, and her heart felt like it was swelling. She felt so relieved, it was like her body was going to simply fall apart.

I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it.

Rimi placed her trembling fingers to her lips. She was worried she might cry out if she wasn’t careful.

“It was only after reading this letter and speaking to the Wakokuan ambassador that I realized. But it’s too late now. Realizing after it’s all over does

no good. If only I'd known before things were set in motion..." Kojin lamented. "I failed. I had so many opportunities to see the truth. I always thought it was so strange how readily he signed that divine contract."

Kojin's regret seemed almost painful for him as he continued to force the words out.

"I think I finally understand why Saisakoku was there that day. The only person who could've gotten them there in time would've had to send the request knowing exactly when the Ho House would demand His Majesty's abdication and how everything would unfold after that."

"Too late." The words were like a dagger in Rimi's breast.

Master Shusei is going to be executed the day after tomorrow.

Rimi wanted to scream. The cry felt like it was going to burst out of her, but she pressed her hands tightly to her chest in hopes of forcing it down.

"Let me see Master Shusei!" she said, jumping to her feet. The force sent her chair clattering to the floor, but she didn't even notice. "I have to see him! Please, let me see him!"

Chapter 4: Imprisoned

I

With Kojin's approval, Rimi was allowed to enter the prison.

It was dark and cold, and as the consort was led down a corridor by a guard, she found herself feeling sad.

Jin Keiyu was in one of the cells at the far end of the hall. He was lying on his bed and facing the wall. He surely heard her arrival but was ignoring her.

For Rimi, he might as well not have existed. All she could think of was her impending meeting with Shusei. How should she behave when she saw him? What state was he in? The consort was filled with anxiety.

She was sure of one thing: she needed to see him. Her conviction wouldn't be shaken.

The guard had stopped at the entrance to a stone stairwell, then turned back to address Rimi.

"We're going below ground. The prisoner is in the cell at the end of the hall," the guard explained.

"Umm...would it be all right if I went alone?" Rimi asked nervously.

"I don't see a problem with it. He's quiet, and I don't think you'd be in any danger. But you're a palace woman. Aren't you scared of being alone with him?" he asked, apparently surprised by the request.

"No, I'm fine. I can manage from here."

The guard seemed concerned but relented when he saw the pleading look in Rimi's eyes.

"If anything happens, yell for me," he said before leaving for the guard station.

Once she was sure the guard was gone, Rimi headed down the stairs.

“Make sure you’re alone when you meet with him. I doubt Shusei will say a thing if anyone else is there.”

That was Kojin’s advice for Rimi when he’d secured approval for her to visit the prison.

“If the letter from the Mikado proves anything, it’s that Shusei cares for you. You have a much better chance at shaking his resolve and getting him to speak than I do.”

At that, Kojin had stopped speaking for a moment. He’d added one final, pained comment.

“But regardless of what you learn, it’s too late now.”

The weight of those words felt like they were going to crush Rimi. But even if it was too late, she wanted to see Shusei and hear the truth from his own lips. What was he thinking, feeling, planning? She wanted to hear everything. She wanted to know the truth.

Rimi was sure Kojin wanted to know as well. But standing face-to-face with his doomed son and asking for the truth was probably too much for him to bear. That was why he’d tasked Rimi with it.

I don’t know how I’m going to bear it either though.

The consort already felt ready to start screaming at the slightest provocation. Once she’d heard everything, she wasn’t sure if she would be able to remain calm.

Still, she wanted to be the one to hear it, rather than make Shusei’s father suffer that pain.

Rimi carefully descended the stairs with one hand on the rough wall, which was craggy from the chisels that had carved it away. At the bottom, she found a hallway with two cells on each side and one at the far end.

The underground jail was even colder than the one above, and the air was damp and musty. Rimi had the unpleasant sense that hateful people were skulking somewhere deep in the shadows. She wondered if the resentment of

those who'd been imprisoned here still lingered.

The only light came from the far cell where a slender candle flickered. The faint light illuminated Shusei's face. He was currently enthralled by a book.

Master Shusei.

His image stood out against the malevolent darkness.

As Rimi quietly approached the cell, Shusei finally seemed to notice her. He raised his head, and his eyes widened.

"Rimi?" he asked, clearly shocked, as if he was speaking to a ghost.

The consort approached the cell with her hands clasped together and hidden in her sleeves to keep them from trembling.

Shusei stared at her, forgetting to even close his book.

Silence.

Rimi had a mountain of things she wanted to ask, things she wanted to say and confirm, but she had no idea where to begin. She felt that if she chose the wrong words, she'd just collapse into a crying mess.

"What are you doing here? I'm sure you have plenty of harsh words for me, but this isn't a place for an unattended woman. Please, leave," Shusei commanded, recovering from his surprise. He closed his book and placed it on the table. He stood, turned his back to Rimi, and headed for the bed at the rear of his cell.

"You lied," Rimi said to his turned back.

Shusei stopped and sighed softly.

"I've told hardly any lies," he said. "The biggest lie I've told was to His Majesty when I promised to always stay by his side."

"You're saying you haven't lied? Well if they weren't lies, you still deliberately misled me. About everything."

"Is it my fault if you misunderstood?"

"You wanted me to misunderstand. That's the same as a lie."

“If that’s how you feel about it, I can’t argue. Was that all you came to say? Are you satisfied? Then please, leave.”

Realizing Shusei was intent on continuing with his charade, Rimi’s sadness was joined by uncontrollable irritation.

How can he be so pigheaded?!

“That’s not all I have to say! I know everything. Chancellor Shu does too. What I mean when I said you lied is that you never planned to win the war!”

“And what grounds do you have to say that?” Shusei asked with a small laugh, back still turned.

“Why did Saisakoku make it in time that day?” Rimi asked.

“Heaven’s favor, I suppose. The Quinary Dragon appearing and blowing the mist away was certainly proof of it.”

“His Majesty does have Heaven’s favor, there’s no doubt about that. Tama was there for him. But that doesn’t explain Saisakoku showing up in time. It was impossible. The only way they could’ve made it is if someone asked for their aid before the Ho House even demanded His Majesty’s abdication.”

Not even divine intervention could explain the inexplicable speed at which the reinforcements had arrived. Heaven couldn’t pick up the Saisakokuan ships and ferry them through the air.

“It makes no sense. Why would someone ask Saisakoku for aid before anything had happened? There’s only one person who could’ve done that: the person making everything happen. If someone knew the day and time things would begin to unfold, they’d be able to call for aid beforehand,” Rimi continued.

Shusei was silent and unmoving. The flickering candle cast shadows across his back.

“Prince Shar claimed he was responding to a letter from His Majesty brought by the Minister of Works. And I believe him,” Rimi went on to say. “But for him to be able to respond the instant he received the letter, he would’ve needed to be prepared. Someone had already asked for his assistance. Prince Shar didn’t

say anything about it because I'm sure the person who asked told him not to. Besides, it was in Saisakoku's best interests. They have a good relationship with His Majesty, so they would want him to remain emperor and for Konkoku's government to be stable."

Rimi's voice began to tremble.

"The one who put everything into motion was you, Master Shusei. You asked Saisakoku for aid so His Majesty would be victorious."

"You're just guessing," Shusei said.

"Then who else could've done it?"

"How should I know?"

"Well then, if it really wasn't you, Chancellor Shu is going to have His Majesty demand a clear explanation from Saisakoku."

Shusei turned around, clearly surprised.

"The chancellor said Saisakoku will want to avoid any trouble as well. They will likely tell His Majesty the truth," Rimi added.

"Make them stop!" Shusei exclaimed, taking a few panicked steps toward the bars of the cell. "What point is there in doing that?"

"Point?! Oh, there's a point. We'll know it wasn't you, won't we? But why does it worry you so much?"

"I..."

"Tell me, Master Shusei."

"There's no need to tell you anything. Even if I did, it wouldn't change anything."

"Then Chancellor Shu will advise His Majesty to ask Saisakoku! But if you tell me, then I can talk to the chancellor, and he can decide whether His Majesty needs to know," Rimi said, staring into the scholar's eyes. "What is your answer, Master Shusei?!"

While the consort's tone was harsh, she was holding back her tears. She couldn't afford to cry here.

Shusei closed his eyes, as if he could no longer bear to see her looking at him.

“You have me against a wall. My father must have taught you to negotiate like this. Why am I not surprised?” He sighed before opening his eyes again. “Father wants stability for Konkoku more than anything. Even if I do talk, I doubt he’ll tell His Majesty. No matter what you learn, it’s too late to change anything. But my execution is in two days, and I cannot let His Majesty learn the truth. I suppose it’s fine.”

Shusei looked at Rimi with a defeated expression.

“As you said, Rimi, I was the one who asked Saisakoku for aid.”

“Master Shusei...” Rimi said, placing her shaking hands on the cell bars. The metal was so cold that the skin on her palms clung to it. Her slender fingers had not stopped trembling since the moment she had set eyes on the scholar.

“Everything you’ve done, you’ve done for His Majesty, haven’t you? Joining the Ho House, plotting the rebellion, everything,” Rimi declared.

“That is not entirely correct. I have caused His Majesty considerable pain. I can’t say it was for him. All I can say for myself is that I did it for this country.”

Rimi recalled Shusei saying the same thing in Koto. He’d likely been able to speak with such sincerity because he’d meant it.

“But what made you come up with all of this? Did you really have to?” Rimi asked, bringing herself right against the bars.

Shusei’s eyes were kind as he looked at her.

Master Shusei...

The man she’d thought was dead had suddenly appeared before her. The joy of it made her dizzy.

Yet now she was separated from that same man, who was to be beheaded as a criminal. Her joy and love mixed with grief and despair. So many emotions swirled violently inside her. She felt like her chest was going to burst.

Shusei, noticing Rimi’s trembling, placed his hands on hers. His long, slender fingers were soft to the touch, just as she’d remembered.

It's you, Master Shusei. It's really you.

She was overwhelmed with adoration for him. The man she had grieved for was suddenly right in front of her.

"I've caused you a lot of pain. I'm sorry for that," Shusei said.

"My pain is nothing compared to what His Majesty and the others have gone through," Rimi answered, shaking her head. "But Master Shusei, why would you do this knowing how much everyone would suffer?"

"Because if I didn't, His Majesty's rule would never be secure. And if it wasn't secure, then the country would eventually fall into chaos. Many of the bureaucrats hated and doubted him. I learned that even someone in his inner circle was giving information to the Ho House."

"You mean the Minister of Rites?"

"I didn't know it was him at the time. But it was during our stay at Castle Seika that I truly realized His Majesty was in danger."

"Castle Seika?"

When Tama's health had begun to weaken, they'd taken her there as it was a place of potent spiritual energy. Shohi, the four consorts, Shusei, and Rimi had all gone, along with Jotetsu and Hakurei. They had also carefully selected servants and palace women who had served Shohi for years to accompany them. The selection had been taken very seriously; they couldn't afford to let the unthinkable happen to the emperor while he was away.

"What happened at Castle Seika?" Rimi asked.

"Only the people we could trust were allowed in or out of the castle. And yet, I still received a letter from Ho Neison. It was proof that someone we believed was trustworthy was somehow connected to the Ho House. It frightened me."

It had likely been Jin Keiyu's doing. He, like Kojin and the others, would've been allowed in and out of the castle.

"That was also when I learned I was the son of Ho Seishu. Castle Seika was where I discovered many things. If I had to say when the wheels of fate began to turn, it was then."

Shohi stood on the walkway and looked out onto the garden, which was lightly blanketed with snow. For the first time in a long while, he had no business to attend to this morning.

Wrapped in a cotton robe, he was in a daze as he looked at the glittering snow, his breath coming out in white puffs. Unsurprisingly, he'd gotten little sleep the night before. Perhaps that was why the Quinary Dragon had seemed restless during the night. Now, she was finally snoozing away, curled up on the emperor's bed.

Clumps of snow clinging to the shriveled trees almost looked like little flowers. People called them snowblooms. They were used as a metaphor for something beautiful and fleeting.

Shusei's execution is the day after tomorrow. Then, it will all be over.

Shohi was relieved that things would soon be resolved. He didn't want to think too deeply about his friend's execution. It would weaken his resolve again, putting his personal feelings at odds with his duty as an emperor.

"About time you headed in, don't you think? You're going to make yourself sick," Jotetsu suggested from behind him.

"Yes, you're right," Shohi said. He was about to return inside when a servant appeared and announced Kojin's arrival.

The emperor stood and waited, wondering what business his chancellor could have so early in the morning.

Kojin approached slowly with the hem of his robe raised above the snow. He bowed and then raised his head.

"What is it, Kojin? I didn't think we had any important business today," Shohi asked.

"You are correct, we do not," the chancellor replied. His expression was strained.

"What is it?"

Usually, Kojin would answer immediately, yet he stayed silent. It was like he had something bouncing around inside of him that he was trying to keep from bursting out. He appeared to have come there to say a few words, yet he was now hesitating at the last moment. Shohi had never seen the chancellor so unsure. Ordinarily, Kojin would never come to the emperor looking like this. He was the type of man who liked to have his answer ready.

Yet there he was, standing in front of the emperor, looking lost.

It suddenly occurred to Shohi that maybe the chancellor had come with a problem he couldn't answer. Perhaps he was here because he wanted the emperor's judgment. It seemed he was torn about asking him to make a decision.

"What troubles you, Kojin?" Shohi asked.

Kojin's expression turned pained.

"Tell me, and I'll make a decision. Leave it to me. I *am* the emperor," Shohi urged.

If Shohi had learned anything from his time on the battlefield, it was that sometimes simply acting like an emperor had value. If a man like Kojin couldn't solve his own problem, there was likely no man alive who could. Shohi certainly wouldn't be able to. But if someone was lost and needed a decision to be made, then he would do his duty as an emperor and decide for them.

Kojin took a deep breath, then another, and finally spoke.

"Rimi has gone to the prison to speak with Shusei. I sent her there."

"You? Sent Rimi? To Shusei?" Shohi repeated, bewildered. "But why?"

"Why indeed. If you'd really like to know, I'd suggest you go to the prison and see for yourself."



Touching Rimi's delicate hands put Shusei's heart at ease.

I've wanted to touch her hands for so long. Just like this: softly and without anything to hide.

Shusei's plan had taken a considerable amount of time, and he'd caused Rimi

more pain than anticipated. He felt ashamed.

But now, His Majesty's rule will be unshakable.

With that in mind, Shusei had crafted a plan and carried it out. He only had one goal: bring stability to the land by making the fifth emperor of Konkoku's reign unassailable. He believed that Konkoku would have peace and prosperity under Ryu Shohi's rule.

My judgment was sound. I can take pride in that.

Shusei had watched Shohi ever since they were children, and in all honesty, he had once doubted his friend's qualifications as emperor. Shohi was honest and kindhearted, but he was also childish and unbelievably impatient. Shusei had worried about what sort of emperor he'd make.

But meeting Rimi had changed the emperor. Through her, he'd begun to break out of his hardened shell and reveal his true nature. He had begun trying to understand others' feelings. He had started listening to their counsel and doing everything he could for the empire.

It was precisely because Shohi's true nature had been hidden away that when it was finally revealed, he absorbed so many new things and changed in an instant. It was like watching some rare and precious creature emerging from its egg. Once Shusei had seen that, he decided to believe in Shohi's qualities.

The brilliance that the emperor had shown during the Ho Rebellion had far exceeded Shusei's expectations. It wasn't just due to Heaven's favor either. He had emboldened the soldiers with his fierce willpower, and his men, inspired by his strength, had begun to push the stagnant battle lines back.

That strength had come from his own passion, will, and belief that he deserved to be emperor.

As children, Shusei had misread the emperor. But no longer.

At Castle Seika, I learned there was a traitor near His Majesty, and that I am Ho Seishu's son. But if that had been all, my resolve might not have been as strong. The decisive element was Rimi.

It was while they were at Castle Seika that Shohi had announced Rimi would

be his empress, and the consort had agreed. That was the moment when Shusei had become resolute.

He had not been opposed to her becoming empress, nor had it made him desperate. She was a consort of the rear palace, so it had always been a possibility. Shusei knew his selfish love would never be fulfilled.

But if Rimi were to become empress, the stability of Shohi's reign would directly impact her safety. The emperor and empress were one being. If the emperor fell, his empress would not survive unharmed. It was utterly different from being a simple consort.

Hate and distrust toward the young emperor. The existence of a traitor near the emperor. The truth of his own birth. Rimi's selection as empress. Shohi's growing abilities as a ruler. All at once, Shusei had become aware of these things. And of course, there was the fondness he'd had for the friend he'd watched over since childhood.

But no matter how suited he thought Shohi was to the throne or how much he loved his childhood friend, Shusei still valued his own life. He would never have thought of throwing it away to secure Shohi's reign. But far too many matters had aligned and pushed Shusei to the decision.

Shusei wanted to protect the emperor, and by extension, the empire. That was his grand ambition, though he was just a culinologist. Despite being satisfied with his position, he couldn't simply sit back and watch in worry. His desire, and fate's pull, were too strong.

"I am the son of Ho Seishu. Even if I didn't realize it, my existence was a threat to His Majesty. I had no way of knowing when someone might learn the truth of my birth. Even if I had refused Ho Neison, what if I had children someday? They would be the new sparks of war."

"What if you didn't have children?" Rimi asked.

"It's not that simple. My very existence is a disaster in the making."

"But why? You could declare to everyone that you're going to serve His Majesty."

"The Ho House would just take me captive, make me powerless with

medicine, and keep me alive as a symbol that the Hos should succeed the throne.”

“Then why not leave the country?”

“They would hunt me down. Or failing that, they could find someone who resembles me and claim they are the real Ho Shusei.”

“They would do that...?”

Rimi, disconnected as she was from the dark corners of Konkoku’s history, likely couldn’t even imagine such things.

With the disappearance of his son Seishu, Neison had given up on the Ho House taking the throne. But when a new opportunity arose, he was desperate for another chance. He also had Mars, or Jin Keiyu, supporting him. For a man like Mars who enjoyed watching others suffer, no possibility seemed too strange.

“My existence is a threat to Konkoku itself,” Shusei insisted. “This country had a fundamental flaw: there should only be one royal family, but it had split into the Ryu and Ho houses. As long as there were two royal families, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Konkoku would never know peace. I decided to fix that flaw.”

Seeing Rimi up close like this, Shusei was suddenly reminded of the time they’d spent working across from each other in the cuisinology hall. She’d known little of Konkoku, so he’d spent time teaching her all sorts of things.

“Even if I didn’t join the Ho House or have any children, or if I fled the country, my existence would always be a cause for war. So how do I go about making sure I am not a threat to His Majesty?” Shusei asked.

Rimi’s head jerked back at the question. Though she often seemed absent-minded, she had good intuition. She quickly grasped his meaning.

“Well?” the scholar asked.

“You... You would acknowledge yourself as Master Seishu’s son, make sure everyone recognized who you were, and then die,” Rimi responded fearfully.

“Exactly. But I wasn’t interested in a miserable, meaningless death. If my

existence couldn't be allowed, then I would make His Majesty's rule unshakable. That was my ambition. I decided I would utterly destroy the Ho House. I would make it so His Majesty would be justified in dismantling my house and escape any accusations of tyranny. I made it so it was the only rational decision."

When Rimi had gone missing with Jotetsu after being attacked by I Bunryo's assassins, Kojin had made Shusei sign a divine contract.

Father was surely trying to test my resolve. As good a way as any.

Shusei had signed the contract without hesitation because no matter what the scholar planned after that, it would be for Shohi's sake. Of course, he'd been careful with his wording.

"I hereby profess my loyalty to the Fifth Emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi, and swear to protect his rule even if it costs my life."

He'd had to make sure to avoid writing things like "stay by the emperor's side" or "will not make him suffer." Shusei could not stay by the emperor's side and, even if it was temporary, he knew he would make Shohi suffer. He couldn't end up breaching the contract and suffering divine punishment because he'd chosen his words carelessly.

After all, he had found a way to hound the emperor. He had taken up the mantle of Lord Ho and attacked Shohi at every turn.

That was the most critical part.

If Shusei had held back and anyone suspected it was a plot for Shohi's benefit, all would be lost. Not to mention, Kojin was not a fool who could be outplayed with anything but Shusei's best.

So the scholar did everything in his power as Lord Ho. He had used every method to drive the emperor from the throne and take him to war. At that moment in time, Shohi was truly his enemy.

Only with the final move did he let himself be beaten.

Seeing the thick fog that day had worried Shusei greatly. There was the possibility the fog would slow the Saisakokuan ships or that the warships'

attacks would miss the Ho army. It was why he'd had his spy light signal fires to reveal the army's location to the Saisakokuans.

But unexpectedly, the Quinary Dragon had appeared and banished the mist.

Now that was Heaven's blessing.

The dragon had wielded its power as if it was mocking Shusei and his little tricks.

From the beginning to the very end, the scholar had fought with all of his abilities. It had been like being locked in a togi match with himself.

The more Shusei could make himself hated by everyone, the better. It was exactly what he'd planned. And even if someone learned his true intentions, they wouldn't be able to forgive him for going so far, which was perfect.

Because in the end, Shusei had to die. Otherwise, there was no point to any of this.

He didn't want to die, of course. But his existence was too great a threat. Even if Shohi and Kojin pardoned him, Shusei's existence would remain a source of discord. Letting the scholar live would be naive.

From Shusei's perspective, even raising and caring for him as Kojin had was far too lenient. His father was more compassionate than his son.

If I had been in Father's position, what would I have done with me?

It was a dark thing to imagine. Shusei felt he would've taken the simplest and surest method.

While his existence hadn't been much of an issue during the previous emperor's reign, when Shohi's time came, it would undoubtedly become one. It wasn't difficult to imagine. So, before that could happen...

Primarily, it was clear to everyone that the coexistence of the Ryu and Ho houses was a major flaw for Konkoku. However, no one could do anything about it directly. The solution, which would have been the destruction of one of the houses, was far too tyrannical. So for the stability of Konkoku and the good of Shohi's reign, Shusei saw it done.

He had been, in his own opinion, cruel.

"I may have been the cruelest of them all. But my ambition was great," he said.

Shusei could not allow himself to live. If, rationally, it was best for Konkoku that Ho Shusei die publicly, then he ought to die. But better to die fulfilled than suffer a dog's death.

"You're not cruel," Rimi said.

"No, I am. I was cruel to you as well."

"You haven't been anything of the sort."

"Has a request come from Wakoku to send you to them?" Shusei asked.

"Yes, it has."

"You probably already know, but that was because I gave the Wakokuan ambassador a letter. Of course it was for your own well-being, but that wasn't the only reason. If the Saisakokuan princess joined the rear palace, it would strengthen ties between our lands, and you were standing in the way of that. That's why I tried to have you sent back to Wakoku. It was for the good of Konkoku."

After a moment's silence, Rimi responded.

"That might be true. I felt like I was standing in the way of things as well. I don't think that was cruel. I think it was the right decision."

Tears streamed down Rimi's cheeks as she spoke. Faint candlelight was reflected on the streaks left by her tears. Shusei reached through the bars and wiped her tears away.

"Please don't cry. I was simply following my ambition. I could've ignored His Majesty and this land, fled the country, and lived freely. I could've ignored my duty and responsibility so I could live as my own person. But I just couldn't say I didn't care what might happen after I was gone. I couldn't help wanting to protect Konkoku and His Majesty. I had my ambition, and I'm happy I've fulfilled it," Shusei said with a smile. It was the truth. Still, his heart ached terribly knowing he would never feel Rimi's warmth again.

"But Master Shusei, you're leaving your cuisinology work half finished! Are

you really fine with that?!”

“I regret leaving my work unfinished, but I thought you’d carry it on for me.”

“I always thought you hated politics though. So...why?”

“I certainly never loved politics. I still don’t. But in spite of that, I can’t escape it. And I would rather put that fate to good use than run from it. Jotetsu told me to enjoy my fate, but I’ve never enjoyed things that are simply fun without any reason or goal. And so, it came to this.”

“Your fate... So, what if you’d never been Master Seishu’s son...?”

“There’s no point in talking about what might have been. But if that were the case, I’d have kept pursuing my work as a cuisinologist.”

How enjoyable such a life would have been. Days spent feeding Shohi cuisinological ingredients and making him grimace, telling Kojin he was more interested in cuisinology than politics, spending his time in the cuisinology hall. Perhaps on occasion learning ways to prepare food from Rimi that wouldn’t make Shohi grimace.

In the spring, he would go and pick wild plants. In the summer, he would experiment with palatable foods for Shohi and his poor appetite. In the fall, he would gather mushrooms. And in the winter when the snow was heavy, he would stay in the cuisinology hall and write.

It all seemed like a dream. How blissful.

Rimi touched Shusei’s cheek. It was like she was mourning the happiness he longed for but was letting go of as she continued weeping. It seemed like she was trying to cry for the both of them.

III

“Please don’t cry, Rimi. I beg you.”

But Rimi’s tears wouldn’t stop.

“Why won’t you tell His Majesty everything?” Rimi, looking unkempt, implored Shusei. “If he’s informed of your feelings, I’m sure he won’t allow you

to be executed.”

“Then all the more reason to stay silent. You said it before. Everyone must recognize who I am, and then I need to die. Even if the Ho House perishes, there’s no guarantee that no one would use that as a pretext to plot something nefarious,” Shusei explained. “The emperor must be the one to pass the correct judgment, directly landing the final blow to end the Ho House. That’s what my plan was from the start.”

This was all for the stability of Konkoku and to fix what was wrong. The Ho House needed to fall. Rimi could understand the logic behind this, but she couldn’t stand watching Shusei get executed.

Master Shusei might be a cruel man, as he’d called himself earlier. He’s cruel to even himself. Despite being a kind man, his coolheaded intelligence forced him to come to such a decision.

Had Shusei been even a touch more flexible, this wouldn’t have happened. He gleaned any necessary information, predicted the future, and made his decision to walk the most beneficial route—even if it meant being cruel to himself.

“Perhaps we can fake your death...” Rimi started.

“It’s meaningless if my execution isn’t publicized. What’s more, the witness and I must declare that I am indeed the criminal Ho Shusei. Will you convince the witness to lie? That may be possible, but what shall you do about the execution? Will you have a different criminal take my place? Do you truly think that the person will claim himself to be the head of the Ho House just so that it survives?”

Shusei calmly continued while admonishing this train of thought.

“In exchange for the criminal taking my place and lying, will you promise to reward the family he leaves behind? Even if you manage to do so, others can easily tell if a person hails from the palace by glancing at one’s hands, fingers, and mannerisms.”

Shusei paused for a moment and looked on sternly.

“And should the person taking my place be truly worried about his remaining family, though a criminal, there’s a good chance that he only sinned because he

simply had no other choice,” Shusei concluded. “Am I supposed to live on while sacrificing such a man’s life? I’ve destroyed the Ho House, started a rebellion, and caused the death of countless soldiers. I must atone for my sins.”

“But...”

“Should I attempt to fool the public at the very end, and the truth of faking my execution comes to light, all will be for naught. I would lose everything. There’s no need for me to cross such a dangerous bridge. Or else my sins, the dead soldiers, and the fall of the Ho House will be meaningless.”

“But I’m sure His Majesty doesn’t want you to die, Master Shusei!”

Should Shohi learn of Shusei’s true motive, the emperor would surely not allow his execution. Rimi was certain of that. She also knew that while Shusei was being logical, Shohi wouldn’t just obediently nod along and accept all of this.

“That was what I was most apprehensive about,” Shusei confessed. “I must prevent His Majesty from finding out the truth. Should he learn of it, he will certainly try to save me.”

“And why is that not acceptable to you?”

“Should I escape death, I guarantee that there are people who will find this outcome most disagreeable. Whatever reason I may have had to start a rebellion and torture His Majesty, it shouldn’t take away from my actions,” Shusei said. “Just because I had a goal doesn’t mean I can do whatever I wish to achieve it. That logic is fair. Since these people won’t be pleased, it’d ultimately lead to criticism against the one who let me live. As such, His Majesty must not pardon me.”

Those close to Shusei, including Shohi, Jotetsu, Kojin, and Rimi would surely try to save him if they learned the truth. However, Hakurei, the four consorts, Kyo Kunki, To Rihan, Ryo Renka, and others who weren’t as close to him may think differently. Rimi had only realized this once Shusei pointed it out.

I don’t want Master Shusei to die. But what can I do?

Shusei was methodically crushing every path of escape for himself.

“What can I do for you, Master Shusei?” she asked in despair.

He smiled.

“Father likely figured out my true intentions, hence why he sent you here. Please tell him the truth, but end everything by confirming the motives behind my actions. He’s the chancellor. I’m sure he won’t tell His Majesty the truth while knowing that His Majesty will become distraught and try to save me.”

Shusei’s clear gaze was telling. His tone had a hint of sadness but not an ounce of regret. He looked to be at peace.

He’s made his resolve.

Shusei must’ve been prepared for the worst ever since this all began. Had he been weak-willed, he wouldn’t have done any of this in the first place.

And I can’t change his mind.

Rimi became painfully aware that Shusei was set on his fate. After all was said and done, he wouldn’t budge. If there was any chance of changing his mind, she would’ve already done so.

“Is there anything else I can do?” Rimi asked.

“Nothing more,” Shusei replied.

“Anything will do. Anything.”

“I truly need nothing more.”

His death was guaranteed. It’d already been decided from the start. Shusei had made sure of it himself.

Rimi felt the strength leave her body from hopelessness. She clung to the iron bars of the cell that supported her crumpling body, with her head down. She was overcome with powerlessness and lost her energy—it was painful to remain standing.

Lady Saigu, Master Shusei is trying to die, and I find myself unable to do anything.

Rimi was tempted to latch onto her Saigu sister, who was beyond the sea. She wanted to fall into the shrine maiden’s lap, weep, and beg for her to pray to the

god, hoping it would somehow spare Shusei's life.

How unsightly and helpless Rimi felt. She was so frustrated and ashamed that she could do nothing else. She felt tears well up in her eyes.

"Who are you?" The Saigu's voice suddenly reached Rimi's ears.

I'm...Setsu Rimi.

"I'm not asking for your name. I'm asking who you are," came a reply.

Rimi was deep in thought before she responded.

I am no one. I'm simply a humble woman under the emperor who serves food to His Majesty and the people around him.

Only when she provided a thought-out reply did she realize her position.

I was formerly an Umashi-no-Miya who served the guardian deity. But in Konkoku, I'm a cook whose duty is to serve people.

Back then and even now, Rimi had one role to fulfill. There was only one thing she could do for Shusei, who'd made his resolve.

"You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya."

Her Saigu sister's stinging words resurfaced in her mind.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I will.

At that very moment, Rimi would do what she could while facing Shusei. It was the only choice for her to make as she was serving people. Her stormy mind calmed down.

There was nothing she could change. And precisely because she couldn't change anything, she'd do what she could. As this thought filled her mind, she stared at Shusei, who quizzically tilted his head to one side. Once he met her gaze, he broke out into a gentle smile mixed with nostalgia.

"Immortal," he murmured.

Master Shusei is very knowledgeable. He knows that it's the only thing I can do.

His kind smile was in front of her.

“Master Shusei, you stated that there was nothing else I could do. However, whether I be a human or an immortal, there is one thing I can do.”

“I’m sure that’s true for you.”

“Please allow me to do the only thing I can. What would you like to eat, Master Shusei? After everything you’ve done for His Majesty and resolving yourself to your fate, what would you like to eat at this very moment?”

“Let’s see... I’m afraid nothing comes to mind. I’ve lost my appetite for many months already.”

He’d lost sight of his desires. Rimi could easily imagine the amount of pain and distress Shusei had endured for the past few months. He’d suffered so much that he’d started to lose his primal instincts altogether.

Which is why it’s especially important to give him something, anything that Master Shusei desires.

Rimi had been serving beings that were much less important and beautiful when compared to the god. At the very least, she wanted to discover what the man in front of her, who was prepared to die, truly desired.

She gently took his hands between the bars and posed her question, as though gently guiding him to an answer.



“Master Shusei, what is the most important thing to you right now?”

“The peace of the empire, which I believe will be brought by the reign of this emperor,” Shusei replied without a shred of doubt.

His Majesty.

Even at this very moment, Shusei was protecting Shohi, who was the most important person to him. Rimi could use this to drag out Shusei’s thoughts.

“Since your youth, have you often had meals with His Majesty?” Rimi asked.

Her words were chosen carefully to further guide Shusei toward his desires. Invited by Rimi’s quiet question and presence, Shusei responded.

“I have, at times. However, I think many were worried watching His Majesty trying to eat. We were all desperately trying to increase his appetite as he didn’t eat very much.” He faintly smiled as he stared at the sky in his dimly lit room.

“I tested out quite a few methods with food for His Majesty,” Shusei continued. “Which is why I decided to start cuisinology.”

“What kinds of foods did you make for him?”

“Various kinds. I believe I made quite a bit, but the majority were unpopular with him. Still, every now and then, he’d state that some foods were edible... Ah, now that I think about it, geyi...”

At the mention of the candy, Shusei appeared to realize something as he firmly stared at Rimi. His eyes sparkled with delight.

I found it. I found Master Shusei’s desire.

Rimi smiled. Shohi and Jotetsu had stated that geyi was nostalgic for them. To these three, it must’ve tasted of memories and happiness.

“Ah, geyi. Right before the war, the Quinary Dragon had dropped a piece. I thought it was nostalgic, but back then, I couldn’t bring myself to eat it. I suppose that’s my only regret,” Shusei said.

“Tama came to you before the war?”

“Indeed.”

Tama was the Quinary Dragon, a divine beast. It had to have known about Shusei's goals and had thus gone to him before the war, carrying a piece of the candy in an attempt to comfort him.

"Do you know of geyi, Rimi?"

"I do. I also know how to make it."

"Then could I request that? That's all I need."

Shusei's final request was so modest that his words tugged at Rimi's heart. This man was so kind and peaceful that the only desire he could muster was something far too humble for a person of his status. Rimi felt downhearted. She knew his coolheaded actions would lead him to an untimely fate.

"Of course," Rimi replied, swallowing her tears so she wouldn't trouble Shusei. She was determined to do what she could. "I shall make it for you, Master Shusei."

From beyond the iron bars, she gave a reverent bow, displaying the utmost respect that she could. Without speaking another word, as a person who served others, she conveyed that she'd do everything in her power to serve the man in front of her.

She did so as an immortal who served humans.



Shohi leaned on the jagged stone wall of the dark stone staircase. He had received a shock so great that he could've collapsed onto the ground at any moment.

Now I understand why Kojin made me choose.

When Kojin had told Shohi that Rimi was headed to the prison, the emperor had immediately gone there as well with Jotetsu in tow. Shohi had no idea why Kojin seemed so troubled, nor did he understand what the chancellor was trying to say. But he had an inkling that whatever it may be, it was surely of great importance. Kojin was normally never hesitant or vague.

Once the two had arrived at the prison, Jotetsu had entered the guardsmen's office, where they were told that Rimi had met Shusei by herself. She had firmly

wished to meet him alone.

The two must've been talking about something that they didn't want to be overheard. Together with Jotetsu, Shohi headed for the stone steps. Keiyu was in a nearby cell, but he was lying motionless on his bed with his back turned toward them—he must've been asleep. Once Shohi set foot on the dark staircase, he heard Shusei's voice.

And yet you never uttered a word to me.

The emperor froze in surprise but gulped when he heard the words that followed.

"I decided I would utterly destroy the Ho House. I would make it so His Majesty would be justified in dismantling my house and escape any accusations of tyranny. I made it so it was the only rational decision."

Shusei's quiet words felt like spears stabbing through Shohi's chest.

What? What are you saying, Shusei?

Shohi found himself stunned. He couldn't move from where he stood. Jotetsu was by Shohi's side on the dark staircase; he also seemed to be listening in. Shusei went on to claim that it was his ambition to protect the emperor and the empire.

Ambition.

Shohi clenched his fists.

How could such an absurd ambition exist? You're a huge fool!

Shusei was uttering thoughts that sounded absolutely ridiculous to Shohi. The emperor was annoyed yet elated by this revelation. Shusei had continuously tried to corner Shohi over and over again. Yet, not once had the cuisinologist voiced his hatred toward the emperor, and Shohi, in turn, had never felt any abhorrence from Shusei. Hence, while the emperor had wanted to come out victorious, he couldn't detest his foe. Now, after finding out Shusei's true goals, it wasn't difficult to put two and two together.

While Shusei tried to back me into a corner, he didn't express his hatred toward me because he was doing this all for me.

Shohi felt some weight coming off his chest.

I don't have to kill Shusei.

Ever since the cuisinologist had turned his back on the emperor, the latter had always felt some sort of pressure—a heavy weight on his shoulders. Finally, some of the weight had been lifted, enough so Shohi could finally breathe again. He was so overjoyed by this that he felt tears well up.

Shohi once again tried to take a step forward. He wanted to appear before Shusei, claim that he heard everything while reprimanding the cuisinologist for being such a fool, and free Shusei from prison.

“Why won’t you tell His Majesty everything? If he’s informed of your feelings, I’m sure he won’t allow you to be executed,” Rimi’s voice echoed through the room.

Shohi dryly smiled and tried to step out, planning on stating that Rimi was exactly right.

“Then all the more reason to stay silent. You said it before. Everyone must recognize who I am, and then I need to die,” Shusei said firmly.

The emperor froze in place. He thought the cuisinologist was being a stubborn fool again, but Shusei’s words made Shohi turn ice cold. Shusei continued to calmly and easily state the reasons why he must be executed to Rimi. It even felt like he was lecturing the emperor as well.

Indeed. Should we have someone take his place, all of this will be for naught. And should I spare Shusei, many would disapprove of my actions.

Worst case, by allowing Shusei to live, rumors may spread that Shohi had manipulated Shusei into agitating the Ho House and forcing their downfall. Should that occur, Shohi would be known as a corrupt emperor who utilized vile methods to destroy a blood relative’s household, which would greatly affect his reign.

That was the one thing that must never happen.

To maintain Shohi’s rule, Shusei must be seen as the enemy until the very end. The cuisinologist’s voice could be heard making his point abundantly clear.

“His Majesty must not pardon me.”

He sounded coolheaded, and his decision was likely correct.

Then what else can I do?

As his vision started to waver, Shohi put both his hands against his temples. He leaned forward as Jotetsu silently supported his body.

Shusei has lived for me since his youth. Must I kill him for this empire and myself? Must Shusei, who started this rebellion, be executed?

The emperor’s body trembled.

“No,” Shohi muttered in a feeble voice. He couldn’t stop himself from talking and had voiced his thoughts unconsciously. “No... No...”

Jotetsu exerted some strength as he supported the emperor and whispered, “Your Majesty, let us leave.”

“No... No. No!”

Jotetsu quietly carried Shohi up the stone stairs as the emperor continued to mutter to himself.

Chapter 5: The Final Thing You Desire

I

“No... No...” Shohi continued to mumble to himself.

The emperor had his head in his hands while he was dragged outside of the cell by Jotetsu. Shohi was forcibly being guided outside, which allowed him to walk, but he couldn't stop talking to himself.

“Your Majesty, please calm down,” Jotetsu said to try and get Shohi to settle down, but the words never reached the emperor's ears.

“No... No... No. No. No!”

Jotetsu used his arms to shield the confused emperor as he quickly walked through the Hall of the Rising Dragon.

“Don't set foot near the living quarters for a while,” Jotetsu ordered the guardsmen and the aides.

“Shall we fetch a doctor for His Majesty?” the dubious servants asked, thinking that the emperor had fallen ill.

“No need,” was all that Jotetsu said before the two entered the room.

The entire time, Shohi's confusion hadn't subsided. He had barely even registered that he'd entered his own living quarters.

“Your Majesty,” Jotetsu said.

“No. No no no no no no!” Shohi cried.

“Your Majesty!” Jotetsu bellowed, claspings the emperor's shoulders and violently pushing him against the wall.

The sudden shock snapped Shohi back to his senses. His lungs, which had been filled with cold air, had finally managed to expel it all with one large exhale.

“Please keep it together!” Jotetsu shouted.

Behind the man was an open door. Fresh snow fell onto the desolate branches of winter, and the snowblooms seemed to shiver as they bloomed on the ends of the branches. Jotetsu had put both hands on the emperor and used all his power to push Shohi against the wall.

“Shu Kojin believed you’d make the correct decision, Your Majesty. So, he decided to make you choose. He could’ve kept you in the dark, but he didn’t. I don’t like him very much, but I respect how he didn’t keep the most important secret from you and entrusted you to come to a decision. He regards you highly—there’s no room for you to panic and stop thinking!”

“Jotetsu...” Shohi’s eyes widened in surprise as he saw tears streaming down Jotetsu’s face.

Jotetsu...is crying.

His eyebrows were arched up in anger, but beads of tears dripped from his cheeks. Shocked by the sight, Shohi’s confused mind had finally returned to normal. Instead, a torrent of sadness flooded from the emperor’s heart. Watching Jotetsu cry had made him do the same as tears formed in the corners of Shohi’s eyes.

“What do I do?” Shohi asked, his voice trembling.

“Only you can make that decision, Your Majesty.”

Jotetsu’s hands, which clutched Shohi’s shoulders, were wet and cold. Even through his clothes, the emperor could feel how icy they felt.

“Why... Why must Kojin force me to make this decision?” Shohi wondered.

“Because I believe that Shu Kojin couldn’t make the choice himself. He knew that whichever path he chose, he’d surely feel regret. And so, he entrusted it all to you, Your Majesty.”

“Why me?”

“It’s obvious. Because you’re the emperor.” Jotetsu firmly gazed at Shohi. “If one were to regret their actions no matter what route they chose, it’s only natural for them to turn to the emperor, who rules the land and has received

their destiny from Heaven.”

“Even if I have been blessed by Heaven, I have my regrets as well!”

“And you must accept those regrets too.”

Shohi shook his head. “I simply don’t know. I’m not sure what the correct path is, and I’m not sure what to choose.”

As he spoke, tears streamed down his face. The streaks left by the tears on his cold cheeks were warm the moment they spilled from his eyes but turned cold as ice by the time they trickled down to his chin.

“You seem to be hesitating, Your Majesty, but you know what the correct answer is. I’m sure of it.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“I truly don’t.”

“Then why are you crying, Your Majesty?”

Only then did the realization hit an astonished Shohi.

Ah, I see.

If he was crying, it meant he unconsciously knew what to choose. Had he been putting Shusei’s possibility of survival or killing him without regret on a scale, there was no need to weep. The emperor would surely be agonizing over the choice, but he wouldn’t be crying. The tears streaming down his cheeks were proof that, deep down, he’d already made his choice. A choice so unbearably painful that his tears wouldn’t stop.

I suppose I know. I’ve made my decision. I understand what path to take as the emperor.

Jotetsu’s face started to become blurred in the emperor’s eyes.

I know that I must kill Shusei.

Jotetsu’s grasp started to loosen.

“So you’ve finally realized,” he said.

“I...” Shohi started, his voice growing hoarse as it trembled. “I must command that Shusei be executed. That’s what I must do.”

Shusei had said so himself. Finding a body double to take his place would be risky, and the emperor must not pardon the cuisinologist.

“Is there a way to kill Shusei and spare his life?” Shohi asked.

“What nonsense are you saying?”

“Is there?”

“Shall we wake the Quinary Dragon sleeping in its bed and make a wish? Shall we beg, ‘We will behead Shusei, so can you please revive him later?’ or something of the sort?”

Even the divine dragon couldn’t do something so reckless.

“I must kill him, but I would like to spare him somehow,” Shohi said.

They couldn’t sacrifice someone in Shusei’s stead. They could only find criminals to use on such short notice. And even if Shohi was able to convince the criminal, those involved with the arrest would soon discover that the person was used as a body double for Shusei. The cracks in the armor would start to show. Was there no perfect sacrifice where there was no worry of this scheme being exposed?

However, even if the perfect body double was found, and this ploy was carried out in secret, Shusei would likely not approve of this. He firmly believed that his death was necessary.

“Your Majesty,” Jotetsu suddenly said in a kind voice. “Your Majesty, the emperor.”

When Shohi was called by his title, he felt his nerves stiffen. He became acutely aware that he must act like an emperor. He couldn’t be pathetically crying while losing his sense of self.

I mustn’t sob. I mustn’t lose myself and fall to pieces. I mustn’t do so in front of Kojin, the four consorts, and Rimi. Especially Rimi. If I show her my tears, I’d only cause her to feel more grief.

But currently, only Jotetsu was present. He’d been by the emperor’s side

since they were children and supported an inexperienced Shohi throughout it all. Perhaps now was the time Shohi was allowed to crumble and show his weak side. Jotetsu was likely experiencing the same feelings.

“Jotetsu.”

The emperor clutched his friend’s arms and clung to him as he stared at the floor. Tears streamed down his face and dripped onto the ground.

I must order him to die. I must say it without showing any emotion. I must tell you to die for the emperor...Shusei!



There was a nip in the air after sunset. The snow that had half-melted in the afternoon was frozen over once more atop the stone tiles. It crunched beneath one’s feet. To Rihan, the Minister of Revenue, held a candle in his hand as he headed toward the prison. The Vice Minister of Revenue was swamped with work and had remained at his desk while Rihan was leaving. Rihan promised to return soon.

In two days, it would be the start of a new month.

Ho Shusei would be executed with Rihan serving as the witness, and the emperor would declare the end of the rebellion. It was essential to take care of Keiyu by then as he was the only other remnant of the revolt.

“I suppose I must force him to drink it,” Rihan grumbled as he set foot on the frosty ground with cold, white clouds expelled from his mouth.

Only two guards were on night duty in the prison’s office. They were diligently scribbling their reports on the table. The guardsmen of the prison rotated every month. Since they’d be switching out by the day after tomorrow, they needed to write reports to ensure a smooth transition for the next set of guards.

“I’ll do as I wish, so pay no heed,” Rihan said to the busy men as he headed to Keiyu’s cell.

Torches dotted the corridors, but the light never reached the cell. Rihan brought his candle close to the iron bars to illuminate the inside. Keiyu was lying on his bed, his back turned.

“Have you not drunk it yet?” Rihan asked with a sigh.

The Minister of Revenue knelt in front of the cell and gazed at the small, untouched bottle of poison he had offered Keiyu the day before. The prisoner didn't respond. Judging from yesterday's reaction, it seemed unlikely that he'd poison himself. Between the bars, Rihan noticed a chipped bowl of congee within the cell. The obviously unappetizing meal also remained untouched.

Keiyu ought to have been exhausted, and he surely must have been hungry. He'd been stuffed into a cramped area without seeing the light of day for three months.

“Why? Your death is inevitable. Why do you resist until the very end?” Rihan asked.

A reply didn't come, but he was sure that Keiyu was awake. The prisoner was lying on his bed, wrapped in a thin blanket. It was so cold that he couldn't stop from trembling. It was doubtful that he could get even a wink of sleep.

Yet, Keiyu didn't seem like a man very attached to living. A man desperate to live couldn't have remained so calm when given a bottle of poison. He didn't even plead with Rihan, begging for a way to spare his life because he feared death. Clearly, he wasn't concerned about living.

Rihan felt like Keiyu, the man who, despite having the rank of Minister of Rites, had prioritized his desires above all else, would rather down the poison with a smile on his face than endure being imprisoned in this dark, dingy, cold place that would bring him only pain and monotony. He wondered why Keiyu remained alive.

“Yesterday was the first time I'd ever seen you so emotional,” Rihan commented as he relived the previous day's events.

Shohi and Kojin had shown compassion toward the Jin House, ensuring no harm would befall the Jins, much to the displeasure of Keiyu.

“The Jins have been a reputable household since long ago,” Rihan said. “And yet, you were outraged that your house would not be sullied. Why is that?”

Of course, no response came, and Rihan hadn't expected one either. What kind of relationship did Keiyu have with his family's home? What relationship

did he have with his parents, siblings, and relatives? What was he thinking right now? Rihan hadn't the faintest clue behind Keiyu's thoughts.

"I've known you since we were students, but I haven't a clue about your household or childhood. I know nothing about you," Rihan muttered, surprising even himself at his own ignorance.

He'd conversed with Keiyu numerous times in the past. They'd broken out into arguments, taught each other studies, discussed philosophical propositions, and provided their opinions regarding their political ideals. And yet, the two had surprisingly divulged very little about their personal lives to each other. Keiyu had never eagerly touched upon this subject. Rihan had also avoided talking about his upbringing and household. His house wasn't one that he yearned to discuss anyway.

Perhaps we should've tried to learn more about each other.

Then Rihan may have been able to catch Keiyu before the latter had acted.

As his friend, I was being negligent.

Despite the stone floor being cold enough to make him shiver, Rihan sat cross-legged in front of the iron bars as his topic was a serious one that warranted taking a seat rather than standing. With a sigh, he brushed his fingers over the scar under his right eye.

"I don't think I've ever talked about this before, but this wound was inflicted by my mother."

II

"I call her my mother, but I have no blood relation to that woman," Rihan said quietly.

There was no response, but he continued anyway.

"The previous head of the To House only had a daughter, so they took a groom from a house of a lower rank. This act was unprecedented for the Tos, but my father was known as a brilliant man," Rihan explained. "His house's rank was low, but he was highly ranked in his government post. However, the

woman who took my father as her husband mocked him for his rank and treated him with contempt. She also grew easily jealous and was quick to anger. She'd wait for any reason and start throwing whatever she could grab."

Rihan didn't even want to remember that woman's ugly face as it contorted with rage when she screamed vulgar obscenities at his father. Thus, when Rihan became a student, he did his best to not touch upon this subject. He was ashamed of his own household.

"Naturally, my father looked for an escape from the reality he faced within his house. He had an affair with a handmaid in the To House, and I was born. The moment she gave birth to me, my father's wife took me away and treated me as though I was her own. Cruelly, she kept my biological mother within the household, worked her to the bone, insulted her, and physically abused her. When I was seven, she threw a tantrum and tried to stab my mother. I instinctively tried to shield her, and the blade slashed my cheek."

Despite the incident having occurred when Rihan was still a young child, he still vividly remembered the feeling of the blade cutting his face. Oddly enough, he couldn't recall the pain. However, he had recollections of that woman's awful face as she threw a fit and claimed it was all his fault. He also remembered his mother's warmth as she hugged him while she wept.

"I don't like my household much," Rihan admitted. "I have no idea what your childhood was like, but since you don't like your house either, I suppose we're the same in that regard."

He gazed at the candle's wax, heated by the fire, as it dripped.

"What happened to your biological mother?" Keiyu suddenly asked.

Rihan looked up in bewilderment, but Keiyu still had his back turned.

"She was chased out of the To House, but my father managed to pull a few strings," Rihan answered. "My father's household technically took her in as a handmaid, but she's treated as his wife."

"Then I suppose your mother was lucky," Keiyu remarked as he slowly got up. "Why did you tell me this story?"

"Because you seem to dislike your own household. Suddenly, I realized that

even though we've spent many years together, we've never talked about our pasts. That surprised me, so I decided to tell you."

"And? Do you expect me to do the same?" Keiyu asked with a scornful smile.

Rihan shook his head. "No. You can if you like, of course, but I'm sure you have your reasons for wanting to keep quiet. Honestly, I don't want to discuss matters like this with others, and I've never done so before. I don't think I'll be eager to share this story again either."

Keiyu's eyes flickered with hesitation.

"If you don't take the poison of your own accord, I shall simply enter your cell tomorrow, restrain you, pinch your nose, pry your mouth open, and force you to take it. I believe that's all I can do," Rihan said, gazing at the bowl of congee on the floor.

It's much too cruel for you to end your life eating that garbage.

Keiyu was indeed a criminal who'd committed a grave offense, but as a longtime friend, Rihan had wanted to at least show a bit of consideration for him at the very end.

"Tomorrow, I shall do something utterly horrible to you," Rihan continued. "Even if I tell you to not resist, I find that to be an impossible request to make. I encourage you to resist to your heart's content, and I shall do what needs to be done. I'll likely remember tomorrow's events for the rest of my life and will be haunted by them. Before that happens, if there's anything you'd like to eat, I can bring it to you."

Wanting to meet someone or do something for the last time would require approval from others and would likely be shot down. However, meals could be brought to prisoners without approval.

After a long silence, Keiyu finally opened his mouth.

"Tian zhou," he said.

"What's that?"

"If you don't know what it is, that's fine," Keiyu answered, once again turning his back toward the minister.

“I don’t know what that is, but I’ll ask around and bring it for you,” Rihan said as he picked up his candle and stood.

He left the prison and headed straight for the Ministry of Revenue.

“Would you know where the empress candidate, Setsu Rimi, is right now?” Rihan asked the vice minister.

She was the first person he thought of when it came to food. *She* might know of tian zhou and may even be able to make it.

“I heard that she was called to the Hall of Law and Culture this morning,” the vice minister replied. “Perhaps Chancellor Shu will know where she is. Is something wrong, Minister? Do you require anything from her?”

“I have a question for her.”

“For her? May I ask about what?”

“I want to ask if she knows anything about a dish called tian zhou.”

“Tian zhou? What about it?”

The vice minister, illuminated by the candle’s flame, looked befuddled as he held a brush dipped in ink. Rihan was taken aback by his vice minister’s nonchalant response.

“Do you know of it?” he asked.

“Know of it?” the vice minister repeated. “Any commoner will surely be familiar with it. Ah, but you don’t eat breakfast made by street vendors, do you, Minister? Even amongst commoners, people who normally get breakfast from vendors are usually living in poverty. Although, I used to go there as a child before my family’s business had taken off.”

The vice minister had become an official after passing the civil service exam, but he had been born into a merchant household.

“What is it?” Rihan asked.

“It’s congee made from lotus seeds and jujubes. You take rice, water, lotus seeds, and jujubes, then simply boil them together. There’s no flavoring; you sprinkle salt over it and eat. It’s not a dish that’s so delicious that you’ll come

back begging for more, but it warms you up in the winter, so many will happily eat it.”

“I see. Then I suppose any chef can make it.”

“Certainly. Anyone that can make congee can surely make the dish.”

“Thank you. Apologies, but I must be off again.”

Rihan once again left his office and headed to the kitchen located in the northern area of the Hall of the Rising Dragon. Yo Koshin, the Chief of Dining, lived there. Even if he wasn’t available for some reason, there were many cooks under him. If anyone could make the congee, Rihan wanted someone to quickly make the dish for him and bring it to Keiyu right away. The minister wanted to feed Keiyu what he desired so that he may enjoy his final moments for as long as possible.

But how does Keiyu know of this commoner’s dish when I don’t?

Even though Keiyu was known to often walk around the city for fun, it was hard to imagine him mingling with the poverty-stricken commoners while wearing similar attire. When they were students, they lived in Master Yo’s manor and hadn’t gone to the city.

So he knew about this dish before he became a student when he was living in his household.

But the Jins had been an aristocratic household for many generations. Though a child, the house’s heir surely would not go to a street vendor for food.

What kind of childhood did Keiyu have?

Rihan wanted to know. It was only when he was about to kill Keiyu tomorrow that he finally became curious.



It had taken quite a while. By the time Rimi had finished telling Kojin everything, it was already dark outside. Once Rimi had exited the prison, she headed straight for Kojin in the Hall of Law and Culture. She knew that the person who wanted to know the truth about Shusei more than anyone else was Kojin. While Shusei’s words were still fresh in her mind, she made sure to

commit everything she heard from him to memory. She wanted to tell Kojin everything she knew without changing a single word.

However, Rimi was in a state of panic as well. She was clearly distraught and needed some time to start her story. The consort was allowed to enter the office and sat in the same seat at the table as she had that morning. The moment she did so, tears flooded from her eyes as though a dam had burst. She was in no state to talk.

Kojin didn't reproach Rimi for her actions. Instead, he quietly poured a cup of tea and placed it in front of her. He sat across from her and sipped his tea with no discernible expression. He simply waited.

Moments later, Rimi had finally calmed down and started to talk in short bursts. She was unable to speak in a continuous rhythm as she would periodically be overwhelmed by her emotions or require time to accurately recall Shusei's words, forcing her to become silent.

Kojin never interjected, and listened intently. He'd gently nod every once in a while or faintly furrow his brows. As the room grew dark, Kojin lit candles, placing one candleholder on the table and two atop a cabinet. Rimi and Kojin's shadows appeared on the walls, and they wavered slightly whenever a draft came in. A brazier was also placed under the table, warming the room.

The comfort of this room was a far cry from the dark, cold cell where light would never reach. Rimi's heart would incessantly ache when she knew that Shusei was spending his time in such a freezing and desolate prison as she spoke. Being in a warm room caused her distress; she even wished to be in the same pitch-black, chilly space as Shusei.

Once Rimi had finished her story, silence filled the room. Finally, Kojin stood up and spoke.

"Thank you for sharing."

He approached a closed, round window and opened it halfway, allowing the cold breeze to fill his office. Her fists clenched atop her knees, Rimi posed a question to Kojin, who had his back turned.

"What will you do, Chancellor Shu?"

“I’ll tell Eika everything that you found out. She’s been ill in bed ever since the Rebellion of the Ho House. It may not do much, but perhaps it can provide her with even a sliver of salvation.”

“Is that all?” Rimi couldn’t help herself as she seemed to implore him.
“Chancellor Shu, will you not do anything else?”

“Do you think that I should?”

Rimi bit her lip when she was asked the question. She felt like a child throwing a tantrum. Secretly, she had hoped that Kojin would have been able to do something about this situation. However, having already heard the explanation from Shusei, she knew very well that no one could do anything about it.

“I will...entrust everything to the heavens,” Kojin said quietly, his voice trembling.

He still had his back turned to Rimi, but she thought he may have been crying.

“I understand,” she replied.

That was all they could do. Though Kojin didn’t want to love Shusei, he cherished the cuisinologist so much that he was unable to erase his feelings. Since the prisoner’s father had made his decision, there was truly nothing else for Rimi to do.

Then I simply must do what I can.

She was determined to grant Shusei’s wish, remembering him smiling at her in his dark prison cell.

“Master Shusei told me he’d like some geyi. May I borrow a kitchen? I’d like to make it for him,” Rimi requested.

“You may use the kitchen that the court cooks use. I’m sure that a majority of the ingredients are available there. Regarding gaining permission, I shall take care of that.”

And with that, Kojin immediately sent a messenger boy to Yo Koshin and attained his approval. Since Koshin and the other court cooks had finished their daily duties, Rimi was free to use the area as she pleased.

With no flames roaring over the stoves, the kitchen was cold and quiet. As

Rimi stood by the entrance, she reminisced about the time she was led here by Shusei. Back then, the scholar's hands had been full with matters pertaining to Saisakoku, and he had fainted in the midst of it. Rimi, who was nursing him back to health in the cuisinology hall, had been called "cute" by Shusei. His words had made her so happy that she had thought she was dreaming.

I wonder how Master Shusei is feeling now.

He had discovered the truth behind his birth and had risked it all to maintain Shohi's reign. Surely, he had no time to think about love and affection. Rimi knew that Shusei didn't dislike her, but she had no clue if his thoughts had been unchanged since then.

I...love him.

The first person in Konkoku who'd shown kindness toward her was this cuisinologist, and that part of him had remained the same. As she realized this, the feelings she'd kept hidden away started to resurface. The feelings that she believed she'd shattered had pieced themselves together again. She lit the oil lamp that was in the cavity of the pillar.

I need just the right fire to make geyi. I'll need a brazier and must light the coals.

Rimi peered into the hearth and saw a mountain of ashes, which she guessed had buried the glowing embers. After using a fire hook to scoop the ashes aside, she saw three pieces of red-hot charcoal, proving her assumption correct. All she needed was to place wood to increase the size of the fire before adding more charcoal.

She added some kindling and fanned the coals to make the fire bigger. She then put in some small pieces of charcoal meant for the brazier.

I need a roasting pan, a wooden spatula, and a flat plate.

After Rimi gathered the necessary tools, she went to the stone pantry to take out some ingredients.

Sugar and a few types of tree nuts.

Once she laid it all out on a table to start her work, she heard a shocked voice

coming from the entryway.

“Setsu Rimi?”

Rimi looked in disbelief as she saw a person she’d never expected to set foot in the kitchen.

“Minister of Revenue?”

III

Rihan looked just as surprised to see Rimi but quickly reverted to his stern demeanor and entered the kitchen.

“What are you doing, Setsu Rimi?”

“I’m cooking for a certain person. I’ve already received permission from the Chief of Dining.”

Had she told the minister about Shusei, she felt Rihan wouldn’t allow it. Even if Rimi was somehow able to explain the whole truth, had he said, “No matter what, I cannot forgive Shusei,” consideration toward the cuisinologist would surely not be given. Rimi braced herself, expecting a barrage of questioning, but none came.

“I see,” Rihan replied before falling silent. He was acting a bit different from normal.

“Did something happen, Minister?” Rimi asked.

It was unusual to see Rihan personally entering the kitchen alone. He remained silent for a while. He brushed his fingers over the scar under his right eye and looked uncomfortable.

“Er... Is your dish of the utmost urgency?” he asked.

“I can prepare this quickly, and I simply need to bring it by tomorrow. It’s not urgent,” Rimi replied.

“Then could I make a request? Could you make congee from lotus seeds and jujubes? It’s called tian zhou. I believe no seasoning is required, just salt to taste. You can simply add the lotus seeds and jujubes to plain congee.”

Congee could quickly be prepared once the hearth had been lit. Since it was the winter season, no raw lotus seeds or jujubes were available, only dry, preserved ones. They just needed to be soaked in water and added to the congee. It was easy to make and not a hassle at all.

“I can make that for you very quickly. Would you like it right now?” Rimi asked.

“Indeed. I apologize, but could you do that for me?”

Judging by his pensive gaze, Rimi intuited that this request was one that mustn't be declined. She nodded.

“Certainly. I'll get started right away,” she said.

Rimi took out an iron pot and prepared the rice, lotus seeds, and jujubes. Once she drew some water from a well, she submerged the lotus seeds and jujubes while washing the rice. Rihan sat on a simple chair in the corner of the kitchen. He stared at Rimi as she gracefully moved around the kitchen.

The fire is starting to grow stronger.

Finding the perfect timing, she added the washed rice and some water into the pot, then put it over the stove.

“You're always cooking,” Rihan remarked. “You must've served numerous people your food. So, I'd like to ask you: when a person in the face of death requests a certain meal, what does it mean?”

Rimi, who was carefully watching the flames, stood still. Did Rihan pose this question for a specific reason, or did he simply just want to initiate some small talk? His words struck her heart.

What does it mean?

She thought back to Shusei, and what geyi meant to him.

“What do you think?” Rihan asked.

Rimi, deep in thought, stared at the flickering flames before she spoke.

“I believe some people would simply ask for their favorite foods.”

“I don't think this food is this person's favorite.”

Geyi was also surely not Shusei's favorite.

"What does it mean when they want their last meal to be a dish they aren't even so fond of?" Rihan asked again.

"Because eating it may make them happy..." Rimi murmured while internally shouting her protest at her comment. She decided to rephrase her answer.

"Eating the food makes them happy or may remind them of happiness."

The words tumbled from her mouth. Her unconscious thoughts had apparently formed the words for her. Only then did Rimi fully understand.

Master Shusei felt happiness when he spent his childhood days with His Majesty and Master Jotetsu. He wants to be reminded of those happy times and feels nostalgic about his youth.

This further solidified that Shusei had steeled himself to not shy away from his grisly fate. In his final moments, the nostalgic happiness he yearned to feel was when he spent time by Shohi's side. Shusei had treasured Shohi so much and wouldn't even dream of endangering the emperor's future.

"Hmm, interesting. I see. You could be right," Rihan mumbled.

Rimi stood up when she heard the congee start to bubble. She took a sieve, scooped the lotus seeds and jujubes from the water, and added them to the congee. She quickly stirred it and waited for the ingredients to cook.

When the dish had started to cook nicely, she took the pot from the stove and brought it to a table. She poured the congee into a small bowl and covered it with a lid. Rimi placed the bowl of congee onto a small serving platter, provided a spoon and a smaller bowl to serve it, and added a pinch of salt on the side.

"Does this suffice?" Rimi asked.

Rihan stood up and approached the platter.

"This is more than enough. You have my gratitude, Setsu Rimi," he answered along with a nod.

"May I ask who you shall be serving this to? Is it a person who is important to you?" Rimi asked while staring at Rihan's face.

"Why would you think that?"

“A hunch. You look rather worried, Minister, as though you’re anxious if the person you’re serving will be happy with this food. If you care about this person that much, then surely they must be important to you.”

Looking slightly ashamed, Rihan stroked his face with his hand.

“Was I really making such an expression?” he asked.

“If that is the case, I hope you will take these.” Rimi placed another set of spoons and serving bowls onto the platter. “If possible, I hope for you to eat alongside this person, Minister. Food tastes much better when you eat it with someone.”

“I see. Indeed, it’s quite boring to simply watch a person silently eat their food.” Rihan took the platter and whispered, “Thank you, Setsu Rimi.”

With that, he left the kitchen.

The minister had discussed food for someone in the face of death.

This implied that the congee was for someone in that situation.

Perhaps it’s for the Minister of Rites.

Keiyu, who was trapped in a cell like Shusei, needed to be executed as well before the rebellion would be declared over. In fact, the former Minister of Rites had been working with the Hos to threaten the emperor’s reign and had used Hakurei to conspire to take Shohi’s life. That was an unforgivable crime. When he laughed and declared his reason for cooperating with the Ho House, Rimi couldn’t understand his train of thought and feared him. He seemed like an odd, supernatural being to her.

However, Rihan had been friends with Keiyu since they were students. While Rimi may have sensed something otherworldly about Keiyu, Rihan, who’d been his friend since their youth, may have seen things differently. The Minister of Revenue must’ve been looking at something that Rimi couldn’t possibly have seen. And in Keiyu’s last moments, Rihan must have wanted to do whatever he could for him as a friend.

I must do the same.

She exhaled and looked down at her feet, trying to cheer herself up and keep

it all together.

“It seems Rihan has been here,” a voice said.

Shocked, Rimi looked up.

“Your Majesty.”

Gazing in the direction where Rihan had gone, Shohi entered the kitchen.

“He left not long ago. Do you have some business here, Your Majesty?” Rimi asked.

While it was near the Hall of the Rising Dragon, the kitchen was somewhere the emperor would never set foot in. It was extremely odd to see Shohi here.

“What did Rihan come here for?” Shohi asked, ignoring Rimi’s question.

“Ah, he requested I make him congee. He’ll apparently be serving it to someone. And what about you, Your Majesty?”

“What are you here for?”

Once again, Shohi ignored Rimi’s query. He seemed to be doing it purposefully, but not out of anger or irritation. His eyes were calm, and his tone was composed. However, his expression was also vacant. Clearly, he wasn’t all there, but he was trying his best to hide that by acting nonchalant and regal.

Is His Majesty all right? Why is he here?

Rimi was curious, but seeing the emperor’s face, she was overcome with an impulse to speak.

I want to reveal everything to His Majesty. I’d like to tell him about Master Shusei and beg for his life to be spared.

She clenched her skirt and fought back against the compulsion.

But I mustn’t say it.

Shusei had stated that’s what he feared the most. Should Rimi tell Shohi the truth right now, even if Shusei’s life was spared, the scholar wouldn’t be happy. On the contrary, Shusei would surely detest Rimi and possibly even kill himself.

She held back and told herself she must only do what she could.

“I...was thinking of making geyi for Master Shusei,” Rimi said. “He requested the candy, and I’ve received permission from Chancellor Shu. Is that all right with you?”

Shohi gazed at the prepared grazier, roasting pan, sugar, and tree nuts.

“I shall make it as well. Allow me to help you,” he said.

“Huh?” Rimi gasped.

“I was recently taught how to make geyi.”

“But Your Majesty, you mustn’t.”

“I don’t mind. I have already said that I will make it.”

Rimi could only gaze questioningly at Shohi, but the emperor looked back at her expressionlessly.

Why have you said that you will help me?

Did Shohi want to treat Shusei to food he made with his own hands? Even though he’d been betrayed and had ordered the scholar’s execution, did the emperor still hold some admiration toward Shusei, making him want to personally prepare the candy? Why did Shohi even come here in the first place?

“What’s wrong?” Shohi asked.

“Your Majesty, may I please inquire why you have decided to set foot in this kitchen?” Rimi replied.

“I heard from Kojin that you would be here.”

“Why were you searching for me?”

“You were called to the Hall of Law and Culture. I was simply curious as to what you were doing after. That’s all. In any case, we’re making geyi, are we not? I shall help, so prepare what is needed.”

Did the emperor truly come looking for Rimi? That didn’t seem to be true.

Whatever reason His Majesty may have, this is surely the way of Heaven.

Rimi hadn’t a clue as to why Shohi had arrived, nor was she aware of his feelings. But if Shohi insisted on creating the geyi with her, that might make

Shusei happier than Rimi cooking it alone.

If Master Shusei wants to eat geyi to remember the happiness of his past...

Then surely, nothing would make him happier than the geyi that Shohi had personally made. Rimi gently breathed in and closed her eyes. As a person who served food to people, she wanted to serve whatever Shusei desired the most in the most desirable way. And there was a person more fitting to make the candy than her.

Even if Rimi didn't make it—*because* she was the one who didn't make it—this candy would surely be the greatest thing he'd desired. It was her role to set the stage.

While he was still alive, she'd do everything she could to hear the cuisinologist utter a word of satisfaction about the food. Her heart had quietly given her the command.

I know. This is what my role is.

Rimi opened her eyes.

"Certainly. I shall make the preparations," she said.

Bending her knees, Rimi bowed and then acted accordingly. She scooped out the glowing embers of the hearth with a fire hook and transferred them to a brazier. She added sugar and some water to the roasting pan.

"It is ready, Your Majesty. Please put the pan over the brazier and stir with the wooden spatula, just like you've done before," Rimi explained.

Once Shohi took the pan and the spatula, he kneeled in front of the brazier. Needless to say, a person with the title of emperor must never be cooking on his knees in the kitchen. However, no one was currently looking, and Shohi had personally requested to do this himself.

Meanwhile, Rimi transferred the tree nuts into a hemp sack and gently pounded the bag with a rolling pin. She took the sack of crushed tree nuts in her hand and kneeled alongside the emperor.

I can't believe I'm cooking with His Majesty.

The situation was so unusual that she'd never dreamed of it, but it made her

feel oddly at ease.

I can understand why His Majesty had mentioned reconsidering my position.

In the past, Shohi would have never tried out cooking, no matter the circumstances. Now, he willingly assisted her and followed the process diligently. The past Shohi was full of anxiety. He had been oppressive because of his ignorance and was unable to do anything by himself. Upon gaining the knowledge and ability to complete tasks of his own accord, he was now able to quell his anxiety and gain confidence.

This was likely why he was able to reconsider the meaning behind Rimi's existence.

Shohi slowly stirred the spatula around the roasting pan. He was gazing past the cooking tool and into the slowly thickening sugar water. It seemed like he was mixing his feelings into the candy as well. He didn't show any impatience as he silently continued to stir at a steady pace.



As the mixture started thickening even more, it began taking on a tinge of yellow. Slowly but surely, the sugar turned amber, and a sweet aroma filled the air.

“Your Majesty, would you please stop stirring for a little while? I will add the tree nuts,” Rimi said.

She tipped the sack of tree nuts into the roasting pan.

“Would you please mix it all together?” Rimi asked.

Shohi quickly did as he was instructed.

“That should be enough,” Rimi said after about two stirs. “Would you take the pan off the heat, please?”

Shohi removed the pan and brought it to the table.

“I’m supposed to pour this onto the plate, no?” Shohi asked.

“That’s correct. This plate, please.”

The emperor poured the amber liquid, dotted with white, brown, yellow, and red tree nuts, onto the flat, white plate. The thick mixture spread across the plate. After it hardened, they would finish the mixture by crushing it into pieces. Tonight was chilly; only half an hour was needed for the candy to harden.

“You made this beautifully, Your Majesty.” Rimi smiled.

She’d been quietly at Shohi’s side, watching over him to see if he was following the proper steps, and he had done so diligently. It was well-made, and the color was magnificent. It was aromatic and likely tasted sweet.

“This is all I can do for him,” Shohi muttered as he looked down at the amber liquid. His voice conveyed how powerless he felt.

“It’s all you can do, but it’s also the best thing you could’ve done,” Rimi said, shaking her head.

As she stared straight at him, they silently locked eyes.

“Is it really the best?” he asked anxiously.

“It is,” Rimi replied with a firm, confident nod.

“If you say so, then I suppose it must be true,” the emperor said with a smile.

Chapter 6: Kissing Death

I

Rihan.

Keiyu thought to himself in a daze as he heard the rustling of fabric and footsteps approaching.

The Minister of Revenue's stride was fairly large but always in a bit of a hurry. However, Keiyu found it troublesome to move. For the past month, he'd been battling the freezing cold and had since lost feeling in his toes and fingertips. Recently, he felt his senses growing duller. He continued to lie on his bed with his back to the iron bars.

The footsteps stopped in front of his cell.

"I've brought tian zhou, Keiyu."

Did he really? As upright as ever, I see.

Keiyu got up wearily. He'd been fed up with prison food. Since he was going to die anyway, it seemed meaningless to eat. He didn't have much of an appetite or desire to eat. But as a living organism, he couldn't completely discard his primal urge for food as it piqued his interest.

There was a gap between the iron bars for providing food to the prisoners. Rihan slid the platter of congee across the stone floor. He placed his candle on the ground and sat cross-legged next to it.

Keiyu got off his bed and kneeled in front of the platter. The bowl's lid was warm to the touch, and the heat transferred through his cold, numb fingertips. He opened the lid with his still-numb fingers as the steam of the congee wafted toward him.

"Eat," Rihan encouraged.

Keiyu had lost his appetite, but he found himself tempted to eat. He wasn't

hungry as much as he was desperate to touch something warm. He took a spoon and a serving bowl and ladled his share. He noticed an extra spoon and bowl.

“Give me my share too,” Rihan said haughtily once he’d seen Keiyu gazing at the additional set of tableware.

“Are you going to eat too?” Keiyu asked, looking up.

The Minister of Revenue nodded as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

“I have to take away your finished meal anyway. It seems foolish to just watch you eat.”

“I didn’t think you’d try to take food from a prisoner.”

“I had the food prepared. I won’t hear any complaints.”

Finding no reason to decline, Keiyu ladled another portion, placed a spoon inside the bowl, and slid it to the other side of the bars. His hands had warmed up while doing so.

“Why did you choose something so bland?” Rihan asked.

“There’s no deep meaning behind it. You simply asked what I wanted, and I immediately wished for something warm is all,” Keiyu answered with a shrug.

He’d correlated warming his body up with eating tian zhou. Rihan brought the spoon to his lips first. After a bite, he frowned.

“It’s tasteless,” he said.



“Put in some salt,” Keiyu replied, pushing a small plate of salt toward him.

Rihan took a pinch of salt and added it to his bowl; Keiyu did the same. The latter sat on his bed and picked up the bowl with his hands as the warmth relaxed his body. He took a bite. The warm congee went down his throat. He felt it make its way to his chest and then to his stomach.

“Delicious,” he sighed.

Rihan, on the other hand, looked rather dissatisfied.

“It’s all right. It warms you up, I suppose.”

“That’s what you call ‘deliciousness...’”

Suddenly, Keiyu turned silent as his spoon stopped.

“It’s delicious, isn’t it, Master Keiyu?”

His memories flooded back to him.

“It warms you up.”

“You should call it delicious.”

He remembered this conversation with a certain woman. Her red cheeks were dry from the cold air blowing in her face as she held a spoon in her chapped fingers. The scent of charcoal had seeped into her thin, cotton attire. She was always in front of the stove, so the smoky aroma had stuck to her hair. Keiyu didn’t hate that scent. In fact, he was quite partial to it.

That frosty morning, they had held hands and snuck out of the manor as they ran toward the street vendors.

“I’ll treat you to something delicious,” she’d said with money clenched in her hand.

She could only afford a single bowl of tian zhou, and the two had split the meal. Near the street vendor was a ginkgo tree, and the two had sat down under it as they took turns eating. It had tasted lightly salted. The congee wasn’t much, but it had been very warm.

She had desperately wanted Keiyu to state that it was delicious. While he

didn't find it disgusting, he also didn't think it was particularly great either. He simply thought that it made him quite warm.

"This is called tian zhou," she had said with a confident smile.

"Why is it called that?"

"The street vendor said it's because it contains lotus seeds, but I still don't get why it's called that. Doesn't 'tian' mean Heaven?"

"Ah, I see." Keiyu had seemed to reach an understanding. "In the nations of the far west, there's apparently a legend that states that eating lotus seeds will make you feel dreamy, like you've ascended to the heavens, and forget everything. Even so, it does seem a bit exaggerated."

"Huh, I didn't know. But even if the name sounds exaggerated, if the dish has such a magnificent name, it seems like you really could ascend to Heaven. It feels so precious, and I think it's nice."

"It feels so precious, and I think it's nice."

The words echoed in Keiyu's ears, and he couldn't help but smile mockingly.

"Precious, huh..."

"Precious? This congee?" Rihan asked as he looked up. "Your comment is rather admirable."

"I didn't say it. I'd been told that even a dish as frugal as this has an exaggerated name, tian zhou, making it seem precious. And they thought that was nice."

"That person must be good-hearted and honest."

Rihan's nonchalant reply struck Keiyu's chest.

Indeed. She was a very good-hearted and honest person. But no one saw her that way.

She was called many names: someone who didn't know her place, a vulgar woman, a hussy. Time and time again, these insults were hurled within the manor. Even her parents couldn't protect her; doing so would imply that the

family was against their master, and they would be thrown out of the manor. Yet, Rihan casually approved of this woman while eating congee as though it was the only natural thing to do. He said that she was a good-hearted, honest person.

“It’s good that you got to meet such a person. If you find that person wonderful and brilliant, you will also want to turn out the same way,” Rihan commented.

Keiyu was well-aware that Rihan was only stating the obvious. However, it sounded like the woman’s existence was being approved and held in high regard. If Keiyu further elaborated on this woman, Rihan would understand her position and offer her more praise.

Rihan was a straightforward person. While he could sympathize with others, he disliked manipulating or toying with their hearts. He would never offer compliments out of courtesy or flattery. He would never try to trick others with his words. He would never do so with his strategies either. He only spoke the truth. The praise spouted by this honest man made Keiyu happy.

I loved her very much.

His last meeting with her was seared into Keiyu’s mind. Had he not fallen in love with her, she wouldn’t have turned out like that. He was at fault. He hated the Jin House and himself. The two intense feelings of hatred mixed together and grew. They restrained his heart and distorted his feelings. When he saw people suffer, he was reminded of her, and it felt like he got to meet her again.

“Even good-hearted, honest people would turn into a completely different person if their heart was shattered,” Keiyu scoffed.

Rihan looked very displeased.

“A person’s true nature will not change,” Rihan said. “Even if their heart is shattered and they seem like a different person, deep down, they’re still the same. One’s core will never change throughout their life. They will only lose it when they die.”

Keiyu had always yearned to meet her in her final moments. Whenever he saw someone in despair, suffering, and screaming with tears in their eyes, it

seemed like he got to see her again. Yet, no matter how many times he was faced with the sight, he was never able to move on from there. For a long time, he'd always been searching for something more.

It was because he literally had not been able to meet her. Meeting her in her worst state obfuscated her true nature.

I'd always wanted to meet—no, I was supposed to meet...

Confusion gripped Keiyu's body. He was deep in thought, trying to clear himself of the feeling. Gifted with his intelligence, he'd search for an answer if he had any questions. Had he sat down and talked with Rihan much earlier in hopes of extinguishing his confusion, his future may have turned out much differently.

Confusion and regret crossed his mind as his brain sought answers. Then all at once, Keiyu stopped thinking. He felt that his confusion and regret didn't matter. The man couldn't escape death. He didn't fear it. In fact, if he could get rid of himself, he'd feel much more refreshed about it.

However, it didn't sit right with him if the people that constantly got on his nerves would gloat over the fact that everything went as planned. Keiyu had done whatever he could to attain his pleasures; yet after numerous people got in his way, he ended up with nothing. That was his greatest regret. The biggest hindrance was his subordinate, a young man called Shusei. Keiyu was sure he'd get to see something interesting if he could skillfully manipulate Shusei's ambitions.

I'd been tricked. I...was fooled.

Keiyu had found that out today. Within the darkness, he had heard everything when he eavesdropped on the conversation between Setsu Rimi and Shusei. He didn't like how it had all gone as Shusei had planned. The scholar likely thought that he had won, which infuriated Keiyu. Before that man, who stole Keiyu's enjoyment away, was to be executed, could Keiyu somehow deliver a wicked blow? Was there a way for him to get the last laugh?

"Who made this tian zhou?" Keiyu asked.

"Setsu Rimi."

“Ah, I see.”

Setsu Rimi had also often emanated the scent of charcoal. She was dressed in a silk ruqun, fitting for a woman of the court, yet she oddly smelled of smoke. Keiyu didn't hate it—it reminded him of the woman he once loved.

“Then I must give her my gratitude,” Keiyu said casually when he suddenly had an idea.

I see. I can still land one final blow to him.

He gave a conniving grin.

II

The hardened geyi had been carefully crushed and placed into a porcelain bowl, but it was still far from daybreak. Thinking that Shusei must still be asleep, Rimi took the plate to the cuisinology hall and waited for the day to dawn. She placed some charcoal into a small brazier to keep warm, but it didn't help much.

The hall, thick with the scent of ink, was filled with happy memories, making her sad. Rimi waited for time to pass as she stared at the black letters under the candlelight. She could almost hear Shusei being mindful of his breathing as he wrote those letters.

Thinking that night had continued for far too long, Rimi stepped outside and found that dawn had already arrived. It was snowing, making the sky dark, which confused her. She didn't know when snow had started to fall, but there was enough to cover her shoes.

Breathing puffs of white, Rimi headed to the prison with her plate in hand. Her hair and shoulders had grown damp from the snow, causing her to feel colder than before. She entered the guardsmen's office while shivering.

“Excuse me, is it all right for me to deliver this to Master Ho Shusei? I've already received approval from Chancellor Shu,” Rimi said.

One guardsman was writing something while the other was tending to his weapons. The one writing stood up and nodded as he confirmed the geyi that

Rimi had.

“I’ve already received an order from Chancellor Shu. He told us to let you do as you please,” the guard replied.

“May I truly do as I please?” Rimi asked. “If so, may I enter the cell to give him this geyi? You may lock it from the outside once I enter, and I shall leave when the time comes.”

“You? Enter the cell?” the guardsman asked, seemingly stunned by her sudden request.

“I don’t think I’ll be in any danger.”

“The prisoner is very obedient, but he will be executed tomorrow. We don’t know what he’ll do. He might take you hostage and threaten us to find a way for him to escape.”

“Should that happen, it will only be because I’m a fool. I feel His Majesty and Chancellor Shu couldn’t care less about my life and will execute the prisoner tomorrow as scheduled. With all that considered, I believe Chancellor Shu told you to allow me to do as I please.”

The guard looked back toward his partner, who was tending to the weapons, hoping for some advice. The other man wearily motioned with his chin, implying that Rimi should do what she likes.

“I understand,” the guardsman relented. “Then shall we go?”

He left the office with a key in his hand, and Rimi followed close behind. Like yesterday, Keiyu was lying on his bed facing away from the corridor. As Rimi descended toward the basement and approached the cell, Shusei, who was sitting down and reading a book, looked up. He smiled at the sight of her but quickly furrowed his brows when he noticed the guardsman silently opening his cell.

“You may enter. I shall come back in half an hour,” the guardsman said.

Rimi slid through the iron bars and entered the prison, causing Shusei to stand up in shock. The cell was locked from the outside once more, and the guard left.

“Whatever are you doing?” Shusei asked, looking weary and surprised.

“I made geyi and came here,” Rimi said, holding the plate of geyi toward him.

“I can see that. Why did you enter the cell?”

She fidgeted a little and looked hesitant for a while.

“I wanted...to be by your side,” she finally answered.

At the Autumn Garden in Koto, she had stated that her feelings for Shusei had been destroyed. So what was she doing now, at the very end? She may have earned Shusei’s disappointment and scorn, but she couldn’t resist wanting to be by his side. She couldn’t bear to face him while being divided by the cold, iron bars.

“If you are uncomfortable, Master Shusei, I shall call for a guardsman immediately, and I will take my leave. However, if you don’t mind, um, please allow me to stand in a corner.”

“I don’t mind at all, but for a lady to enter a prison...”

“I’m fine. I’ve spent a night in the prison of the Department of Service!” Rimi replied with gusto.

Shusei gave a strained laugh.

“Ah, of course. You entered the rear palace while carrying a pickle pot, entered a prison, and were almost beheaded by His Majesty. You have truly lived through many unusual experiences,” the scholar reminisced.

Shusei took the dish he was offered, sat on his bed, and placed the plate on his lap.

“His Majesty made that geyi for you,” Rimi said.

“His Majesty did?” Shusei repeated. He looked down at the amber candy, wide-eyed. “Why? And he personally made it?”

Rimi smiled.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “However, I can tell you that he came to the kitchen himself and insisted on helping. His Majesty did it all of his own accord.”

Shusei gently stroked the edge of the porcelain plate as though he was touching something very dear to him. His profile displayed his quiet happiness.

“Perhaps this is His Majesty’s final act of benevolence. I’m very grateful,” he said with a smile as he gazed at the amber sweets.

Master Shusei seems so happy.

She’d surmised that he would express greater joy than if he’d heard she’d made it by herself. Upon seeing him smile from the bottom of his heart, Rimi felt that she had guessed correctly. She found his smile so precious. Shusei beckoned her closer and used his eyes to encourage her to sit beside him.

“You mustn’t be standing there. This cell isn’t clean, but please, have a seat here,” he said.

“I shall.” Rimi’s chest fluttered with joy, knowing that she’d been accepted.

As she sat next to him, she couldn’t suppress a smile. She’d always wished to sit beside him. The sadness and emptiness she’d felt when he’d become the master of the Ho House had melted away, and her heart was filled with happiness. She was next to the kind cuisinologist.

But tomorrow, he shall die.

Her rational side doused her passionate heart with cold water. The feeling of happiness that filled her body left as quickly as it came, causing her chest to squeeze with pain. Shusei joyfully gazed at the plate of geyi on his lap, took a piece between his fingers, and put it in his mouth.

“Ah, this is it,” Shusei said with a nod before continuing with elation. “This is exactly what I’d been making for His Majesty. When we were children, His Majesty truly had a poor appetite. I made some simple, nutritious dishes for him, but since I wasn’t skilled in cooking yet, most were unpopular with him. Except for geyi. It was the only dish I was able to cook properly, and he found the taste favorable.”

He pinched another small piece between his fingers and brought it close to Rimi’s mouth with a smile.

“Would you have a taste? I suppose it’s a bit odd for me to offer since I requested you cook this for me,” Shusei said.

He’s offering to feed me, isn’t he?

Rimi searched his face for answers, but he simply nodded and smiled.

“Have some,” he said.

“I-I shall.”

She opened her mouth, and a piece of candy was placed inside. She felt her ears grow warm from embarrassment.

Master Shusei hasn't changed one bit.

He was totally clueless and oblivious to the subtleties between a man and a woman. A womanizing man would've noticed the embarrassed Rimi, teased her a little, and whispered sweet words into her ear.

He hasn't changed at all. Master Shusei...has always remained the same.

She gazed down at her lap, finding it painful to watch him smile.

“Is anything the matter?” Shusei asked with a puzzled look.

It would be cruel for Rimi to voice her sorrows to him. He must've lamented about his own fate the most, but he still chose to smile at her.

“Nothing at all,” she replied, raising her head.

She tried her best to smile back, but her face could only form an awkward expression. Shusei's eyes softened.

“Please don't be so sad. I got to fulfill my role, and I'm satisfied. My death won't be for nothing, and I won't live in vain, threatening His Majesty's peaceful rule. I believe that I've done what I could as both the child of Seishu and Kojin. I've satisfied my ambitions, so this is how it should end.”

Shusei fell silent, and Rimi gazed at him without another word.

“I'm glad I got to meet you,” Shusei said gently and calmly. He seemed to be content from the bottom of his heart. “When I first met you, you were carrying a kaorizuke urn. I've found you very intriguing ever since. You assisted me in the cuisinology hall as well. I had a lot of fun.”

“Master Shusei.”

“My apologies. I know it's far too late for me to say all of this. I made you and His Majesty suffer, yet saying that I was glad to meet you is rather selfish of

me.”

“Not at all,” Rimi replied, leaning forward. “It’s true that I was afraid of you when you backed His Majesty into a corner. You were no longer *you*, Master Shusei, but the master of the Ho House. I felt like you had killed the person that I knew. But you have always been yourself. Since the Master Shusei I know is here with me right now, I wouldn’t find you selfish at all...”

Even Rimi knew that her flurry of words made little sense, but she continued to ramble.

“I feared the master of the Ho House, but Master Shusei, I...”

Shusei touched her cheek. She felt his cold fingertips, causing her senses to return, and she fell silent.

“It seems I’ve confused you quite a bit. I’m sorry,” Shusei apologized.

“It’s just that my feelings had all been muddled. But it’s very clear to me now. I love you, Master Shusei, and I always have.”

“You mustn’t say those words. You’re a candidate to become His Majesty’s empress.”

“His Majesty said he would reconsider my position. He has no plans for me to bear his successor.”

“But why?” Shusei asked, looking at Rimi in astonishment.

“I have no doubt that His Majesty has become a person who can make judicious decisions. I’m certain I shall fulfill a different role for His Majesty and will not become his empress.”

“I see.” Shusei turned pensive and silent before nodding. “His Majesty has been transforming into a magnificent emperor while I have not been by his side. I’m sure that he will continue to grow after I’m gone. What a relief.”

Shusei seemed deeply moved by this revelation.

“Yes, I’m sure of it,” Rimi said.

Rimi had served Shohi numerous times in the past, but she knew that the current emperor understood what was most precious to him and would act

accordingly to obtain it. She wished to serve humans, but Emperor Shohi may continue to grow and ascend, ultimately resolving matters that Rimi had been tasked with by himself. Perhaps her role would fade away.

However, that was just fine. That was the ideal image of what an emperor should be.

“I’m certain His Majesty will become even greater,” Rimi added as she stared at Shusei.

The two nodded at each other. It was much too tragic to see Shusei choose the path of death. After all that had happened, if Rimi could do anything right now to stop it, she would. However, the man had chosen his own fate, and she couldn’t find it in herself to criticize his decision. Others may find faults in Shusei’s choice, but Rimi could not. She could fully understand his feelings.

Because his sacrifice came from a feeling of wanting to protect someone, the same person Rimi wanted to protect as well, she could comprehend Shusei’s actions. They were like a married couple who were watching over their child. When the husband offered himself for his child’s future, the wife would feel grief and anguish, but she could never criticize his actions.

Rimi felt great sorrow but still would’ve wanted to avoid this outcome if possible. However, she’d feel grateful for the promising future because of this sacrifice.

“I’m very relieved.” Shusei smiled. “Indeed, I’m glad to have met you. I’m sure His Majesty feels the same way.”

“I... I am too. I’m glad to have met you, Master Shusei. From the bottom of my heart.”

“Thank you.”

Shusei smiled wider still, and his eyes were clear. His gaze tore at Rimi’s chest, making her feel suffocated.

He thanked me... I’m so happy... I’m so sad.

Rimi smiled, trying her best to bury her emotions that were starting to well up. The flame of the candle flickered, causing their shadows on the cold stone

wall to waver.

Half an hour later, Rimi parted ways with Shusei and left the prison. She seemed to be in a sort of trance as she absentmindedly thought to herself that she must return to the Palace of the Water Spirit. In her mind, if she remained at the imperial palace, the next day would arrive even more quickly, and Shusei's execution would begin. She'd hear the gong signaling the start of the execution and be forced to imagine his final moments. She couldn't bear to hear it. If she went to Shohi and told him she wanted to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit, a carriage would be provided for her.

She requested an aide to guide her to the emperor's quarters. Shohi was sitting on a couch, sifting through some documents, while Jotetsu sat on a windowsill and tended to his sword.

"Your Majesty, I'd like to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit," Rimi said with a bow.

"Have you done all that you needed?" Shohi asked as he put the documents on a chair.

"I have," Rimi quietly replied.

Jotetsu stared at Rimi. She saw his bitter eyes and guessed that he knew everything about Shusei. Jotetsu was also a man who wanted to protect Shohi. Perhaps Shusei, who'd shared the same feelings as Jotetsu since their youth, would've divulged some information to him that was still being kept from her. Even if the scholar hadn't, Jotetsu would surely grasp the true nature of the cuisinologist's actions.

"Did Shusei eat the geyi that I made?" Shohi asked.

"He did," Rimi replied.

"Did he say anything?"

"When he heard that you made the candy, Your Majesty, he asked if it was your act of benevolence. He stated that this was precisely the candy he'd made for you in the past and seemed overjoyed."

“He thought that geyi was the same as the one he made? Shusei’s a fool. It looks completely different from his. My geyi is much better.” Shohi angrily furrowed his brows and shifted his gaze away from Rimi.

“You’re right.” She gave a forced smile, completely agreeing with Shohi’s words. “But he seemed very content with it.”

Shohi looked down at the floor and closed his eyes.

“Then that’s good enough. As long as he seems satisfied,” Shohi replied.

“Indeed.”

III

The following day was the first of the month. Snow continued to fall, and the wind was strong. It was still morning, but a rough blizzard was starting to brew.

At the grand gates of the imperial palace, a gong reverberated through the air, signaling the start of the execution. Whether it be rain or snow, executions would never be delayed. With the sound of the gong, the guardsman confirmed the monthly report that was transferred to him and headed to the cell. Behind the iron bars was a man sitting quietly on a chair.

“Are you Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House?” the guardsman barked.

“I am,” the man replied in a composed manner.

“Get out.”

The cell was unlocked, and the man slowly exited, accompanied by a guardsman. The prisoner calmly headed to the execution area with his head held high. His elegant mannerisms had been instilled in him since his youth, showing that he wasn’t a mere commoner and winning the admiration of even the guardsmen. The man didn’t look awkward, nor did he seem too showy. Such grace couldn’t be learned in a single night. His gorgeous skin only accentuated his slender and beautiful fingers. With every graceful step he took, it was clear that he had a noble upbringing.

The execution would be conducted at the grand gates, but from afar, people had gathered around to view the event. In front of the gates were several

guardsmen and a masked executioner holding an axe. To Rihan, the Minister of Revenue, was present as well. Before them was a pedestal made from logs used for beheadings. It was newly made, specially crafted to execute a member of the imperial family.

“I’ve brought the criminal with me,” the guardsman announced.

“Indeed. He is, without a doubt, Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House,” Rihan confirmed.

The guardsmen tied the elegant prisoner’s arms behind his back, had him kneel in front of the log, and placed a blindfold over his eyes. Rihan gazed at the scene, expressionless.

“Any last words?” Rihan asked.

“None,” the kneeling criminal replied quietly.

With a deep sigh, Rihan gave his order.

“Let us begin.”

In front of the grand gates, which had been thinly covered with snow, blood had started to flow.

The blood trickled into the snow and grew cold.

Amidst the blizzard, the head of the master of the Ho House, Ho Shusei, was shown to the public, but was immediately taken away by somebody. Heads were displayed as a form of humiliation, so it wasn’t an issue if they were harmed or stolen.

On the same day, there was a report that the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu, had committed suicide by ingesting poison. While the reasoning was never revealed, the Jin House refused to accept his remains, so his friend, Rihan, had been the one who buried his body.

The emperor had also gathered a hundred officers in the Hall of New Harmony that day and declared the Rebellion of the Ho House was over. Despite still being under the same emperor, the officers cheered with joy as if

they felt that a new reign would fall upon them—when the emperor had appeared in front of them and voiced his proclamation, he seemed much calmer than when he had first ascended to the throne, and he emanated an air of dignity. His mere presence had exerted a powerful aura upon the crowd.

Above the backrest of the emperor's throne was a small, blue-eyed dragon with a pure white body. He was the first emperor in history to appear in front of his subjects with the Quinary Dragon. Once the emperor had finished his speech, the blizzard that had been blowing since morning died down.

When the officers left the Hall of New Harmony, the weather was sunny and clear, casting some doubt if a blizzard had ever occurred. The glittering snow reflected the light of the sun, turning the world impossibly bright.



The day the Rebellion of the Ho House was declared to have ended, the Palace of the Water Spirit had also experienced a blizzard since that morning, and the sky was dark. Using that as an excuse, Rimi curled herself up on her bed, unable to stop her tears. As every minute passed, she knew that Shusei was closer to his final moments, and she continued to weep. When she thought about the execution ending, she once again couldn't stop her sobs. She didn't even possess the strength to get up.

As time passed, the wind that had been blowing against her window stopped. Sunlight began spilling from the door dividing the living and sleeping quarters. In a daze, Rimi saw the spots of sunlight on the floor.

The blizzard must have stopped.

But so what?

Master Shusei is no longer with us.

Rimi thought she'd cried enough, but tears had once again started to well up as she wept into her blanket.

Master Shusei... Master Shusei...

She had been asked to not be sad, but that was impossible. Her sorrow only grew when she remembered him thanking her. Filled with heart-wrenching grief, she cried so much that she felt herself wither away. The consort felt like

she might die while sobbing. She had to think of a way to overcome her woes and stand back up on her feet. But she couldn't possibly find a way to wave her sadness away.

The door creaked, and small, quick footsteps approached her before coming close to her face. She locked eyes with a pair of beautiful blue ones.

"Tama..."

Why was Tama here? Rimi found it odd, but she had no strength left in her body and was stupefied, causing her to stay still. Tama rubbed herself against Rimi's damp cheek and gave a few cries.

The door creaked once again as it was opened wide. Light poured into the room, causing her to squint her eyes from the brightness.

"Are you still asleep? Get up, Rimi," Shohi ordered at the entrance with the sunlight on his back.

Rimi got up in shock and blinked several times.

"Your Majesty... Why are you here?" Rimi asked. "I thought you were going to gather a hundred officials today for your declaration."

"That's already been done. I've claimed that the Rebellion of the Ho House is finished, so I suppose I have some time on my hands. Kojin told me to rest for a few days, so I came here."

Tama leaped off the bed, ran toward Shohi, and climbed up his skirt before settling on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea," Rimi said, quickly getting off her bed to bow.

Shohi nodded; he didn't seem to mind.

"I didn't tell you. It was suddenly decided last night, and I had no time to notify you. I'm a little tired. Could you pour me some tea? I must wait for an item to be delivered," the emperor requested.

Rimi quickly tidied herself up and prepared some tea. She lit the brazier, which warmed the room. She offered some snacks to Shohi, who was reaching for the cup of tea on the table.

His Majesty must know that I've been crying.

The consort felt embarrassed, feeling him gazing at her face. She must've looked horrid with her puffy eyes. She searched for a conversation, hoping to take her mind off her appearance.

"There's an item you're waiting on?" she asked.

"Indeed. I haven't the faintest clue as to the amount of time needed, but I'm certain it will arrive here. Jotetsu will bring it along."

Bring it along?

In the next moment, she heard footsteps—someone was taking large strides in the corridor and approaching the room. It was the footsteps of a soldier, and Shohi looked a little nervous.

"He's here," the emperor said.

"Your Majesty, I shall enter." Jotetsu's voice could be heard from beyond the door.

The bodyguard opened it without waiting for an answer. He was clutching a large item wrapped in cloth on his right shoulder. Shohi stood up and opened the door to the bedroom as he used his chin to point to the area.

"To the bed," the emperor commanded.

"Huh?" Rimi looked stunned at this series of events.

"As you wish," Jotetsu replied, heading straight for the bedroom before he placed the item on the bed.

Shohi followed close behind and laid his hand atop the item. Rimi stood by the entrance to her bedroom as she gingerly looked on.

"Your Majesty, why did you put that item on the bed?" she asked.

"Because I cannot roll it on the floor," Shohi replied.

Tama turned toward Rimi and let out a cry. The emperor, who had his hand on the item, stared down for a while before finally sighing.

"Rimi, come over here and take a look," he ordered.

She slowly made her way to her bed—as she drew closer, she noticed that the item was a person. When she saw his face, she almost screamed and immediately clasped her hands over her mouth.

Master Shusei!

He was alive. While his eyes were closed, his head was moving ever so slightly, looking uncomfortable, which allowed Rimi to deduce that he was still living. All the strength left her body, and she almost collapsed to the floor. Shohi supported her, but she was still trembling.

She simply couldn't believe it. The execution had already been conducted. Had Shohi canceled it at the last minute? Was such a thing possible? Had he done so, it would surely threaten his position as the emperor, making Shusei's actions all for naught. What's more, his very position as the emperor would be shaken.

Shohi would never do something so foolish. The execution must have occurred.

A body double?

But who could take his place on such short notice? Shusei faintly groaned and opened his eyes.

"Are you awake, Shusei? Do you know who I am?" Shohi asked, peering into the man's face.

"Your Majesty..." Shusei mumbled, still in a daze. Since he still wasn't thinking clearly, he gazed at Shohi with nostalgia.

"It seems the medicine worked a bit too well."

"I gave him quite a bit since I knew there would be an uproar if he woke up in the midst of it all," Jotetsu admitted with a forced smile.

"...Jotetsu," Shusei mumbled again as if he was still in a trance. He then turned toward Rimi and smiled. "Rimi."

She was so astonished that her mind went blank. Shusei looked at Shohi, Jotetsu, and Rimi, appearing as serene as ever. As the cuisinologist slowly regained his senses, he suddenly looked shocked.

“Huh?!” Shusei yelled as his upper body practically jumped up. He looked at Shohi with a bewildered expression plastered on his face. “Why am I alive, Your Majesty?”

He confirmed his surroundings and checked outside the bedroom entrance.

“Am I at the Palace of the Water Spirit? Why am I still alive? Why am I here? What about the execution?!” the scholar shouted.

“The execution has already been done, and the master of the Ho House, Ho Shusei, has been beheaded this morning in front of the public,” Shohi explained. “The guardsman of the prison confirmed that the criminal was Ho Shusei, and the criminal in question admitted to being the master of the Ho House. To Rihan, the Minister of Revenue, also confirmed his face and claimed that he was the master of the Ho House.”

Shusei gulped and froze in place. His eyes were filled with bemusement and surprise before quickly turning to despair and anger.

“Did you get a body double?!” roared Shusei. “What a foolish act! Do you understand what you have done, Your Majesty?! You cannot take back this trickery! Why did you do such a thing?!”

“I didn’t want you to die,” Shohi replied simply. “You utilized everything you had for my sake.”

Shusei gasped and glanced over at Rimi.

“Did you tell His Majesty everything? This outcome is what I feared the most,” he asked accusingly.

“I never told him a thing,” Rimi replied. “Until moments ago, I thought you’d been executed.”

“Kojin entrusted me to make a decision,” the emperor interjected.

Flabbergasted, Shusei looked up at Shohi.

“Father did? To you, Your Majesty? But why?” Shusei asked.

“He couldn’t allow this all to end without making me aware of the whole truth. He trusted my decision as the emperor and had me make a choice. So I did,” Shohi explained.

“I cannot believe this. How could a man like Shu Kojin do that?”

“Kojin respects my decisions and trusts me as the emperor.”

“And is this your response to his trust?” Shusei clenched his fists as they started to tremble. “How foolish. How utterly foolish.”

“What did you say?” Shohi furrowed his brows.

“I said that you’re a fool!” Shusei glared at Shohi, his eyes filled with fury.

“You’re being insolent. Be silent,” the emperor replied with raised eyebrows.

“You chose the worst outcome possible, Your Majesty!”

Shusei’s shout of despair was followed by a sharp sound that rang in the air.

“Silence!” Shohi bellowed after striking Shusei’s cheek. “I won’t allow you to call me a fool any further!”

Shusei was at a loss for words, unable to hide his shock.

“*You’re* the fool for assuming I chose the worst outcome possible!” Shohi continued to roar with rage. “Your insolence knows no bounds! I don’t question your intelligence, but you’re a strongly opinionated fool! As proof, what did you call the geyi you ate yesterday? ‘It’s the same one I fed His Majesty,’ was it?! Are you delusional and stupid?! The geyi *you* made was sticky and slimy like sludge, completely different from the one you were given! Yet, you dare believe the geyi I made is the same as yours? You’re a fool, through and through!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Shusei said as he put a hand over his slapped cheek and tried his best to refute. “In any case, if you do not execute the head of the Ho House, everything I’ve done will have been for nothing. It’s not too late. You can still execute me.”

“You’re still talking back?” Shohi put a knee on the bed and grabbed Shusei by the collar. “You assume that I’ve made the worst choice. Even Kojin gave me his trust. How can you, the one who thinks of me the most, not put even an ounce of faith in me?”

Shohi, who’d raised his voice, had tears in his eyes. The sight pierced through Shusei’s chest.



“Your Majesty,” the cuisinologist murmured.

“Trust me, Shusei,” Shohi implored him. “Trust in the emperor that you gambled everything upon. If you are unable to have faith in me, it would make you into an even greater buffoon for betting all that you could on a man who you cannot even trust.”

Shusei’s face contorted with frustration.

“Should word get out that a body double was executed instead of me, it will be all over for you, Your Majesty. Don’t you understand that?”

“I don’t think you have to worry too much about that,” Jotetsu chimed in. His arms were folded in front of him as he spoke with confidence. “There’s no proof that the man executed wasn’t the master of the Ho House. However, many will testify that the man was indeed the head of the Ho House. The guardsmen who escorted the prisoner to the execution area would likely confirm that they saw the head of the Ho House, and the prison records document the same claims. They state that above all else, the man’s beautiful fingers and mannerisms could only be expressed by one born into the nobility.”

“Who was sacrificed in his stead?” Rimi asked, unable to help herself.

It was difficult to imagine that Shohi would kill a completely innocent man, but prisoners were usually commoners, and it’d be difficult for them to mimic the mannerisms of the nobility.

“Ah, the Minister of Rites, Jin Keiyu,” Jotetsu replied.

Rimi and Shusei were stunned. Jotetsu, who’d caught on to the questions the two probably had, filled them in.

“Last night, the Minister of Revenue suddenly came to visit His Majesty, relaying the message that Jin Keiyu wanted Shusei to be spared. He said that he’d be the sacrifice in Shusei’s stead.”

The Minister of Rites? Why?

Keiyu was a man who acted for an odd reason: he wanted to see others suffer. After Rimi’s feelings were shaken up, her mind was thrown into confusion, unable to process what she had just heard. She simply couldn’t keep

up with it all.

“Why me?” Shusei asked.

“It appears Keiyu overheard the conversation between you and Rimi, and he decided to save you,” Shohi said, dangerously close to Shusei. It looked as though the emperor would bite the cuisinologist’s nose off at any moment. “Rihan said that technically, Keiyu didn’t want to spare you, but the Minister of Rites told him, ‘There’s no way I’ll let Shusei die.’ With your own death, this series of events would’ve ended just as planned. Keiyu said that he would like to get in the way of all that. It angered him that you would die with satisfaction about completing your plan. At the very end, he wanted you to fail. He didn’t want you to attain a perfect victory and apparently stated that since you had obstructed him, he wanted to get the last laugh.”

“Impossible,” Shusei muttered. “How could allowing me to live give him the last laugh?”

“I don’t think life or death mattered to that man. He was simply infuriated that you would attain a perfect victory,” Jotetsu said with a frown.

“But if you were to agree to the Minister of Rites’s plans, surely it would only threaten His Majesty’s reign?”

“The Minister of Revenue covered that for us,” Jotetsu answered. “The execution would occur on the first, so all the guardsmen of the prison would be rotated out the night before. The minister had swapped out a few reports that transferred the duties to the next set of guards. One of the prisoners confined in the underground prison has no name. The other is Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House. The new guards read this report, followed it accordingly, and escorted the Minister of Rites as the head of the Ho House. They would be the witnesses that led the master of the Ho House to the execution area.”

Ah, because the timing was at the beginning of the new month.

The new set of guards would review the report and conduct their duties as instructed. Because they believed the report, there was no room for doubt. Guards tasked with maintaining the prison never had any contact with higher-ranked officials; if the prisoner in question acted with aristocratic grace, they wouldn’t grow suspicious.

“At the execution, the Minister of Revenue claimed that the prisoner was indeed Ho Shusei. The executioner and the guardsmen present were specifically chosen—they were all newly recruited to the imperial guards from a remote unit. They were originally chosen because if any of them were related to the Ho House or familiar with officials in the Letter of Compact, they might hinder the execution process, but I suppose that ultimately worked in our favor,” Jotetsu explained. “None of them knew the face of the Minister of Rites or yours, for that matter, and would only testify that the executed man had beautiful hands, skin, and elegant mannerisms that were befitting for a nobleman. The displayed head was immediately carried away by someone as well.”

Jotetsu grinned.

“There were quite a few people below the grand gates trying to catch a glimpse of the execution,” he added, “but they were a good distance away and could only tell that a man of nobility had been executed. I doubt any of them properly saw the face of the person.”

If a different prisoner was used as a sacrifice, the one who captured them and the guards would know that the wrong person was being dragged out in Shusei’s place. They would grow suspicious and start to look into it. In addition, if the executed man didn’t look like a nobleman to the guardsmen, it would only arouse further doubt. These small seeds of mistrust would lead to one’s downfall. If Keiyu was the sacrifice, all of that could be prevented.

To protect the honor of the Jin House, it had never been publicly reported that Keiyu had been arrested. Even if a nameless prisoner had disappeared from their cell, no one would know their true identity. Keiyu had committed suicide by ingesting poison, and Rihan had buried his body. Indeed, his body was there, and it had received a proper burial. All that was needed was to skillfully hide the fact that the head and body were separated.

The last laugh to make sure Master Shusei’s plan wasn’t a complete success...

Was that really it? Though Keiyu’s mindset seemed difficult for a normal person to comprehend, one couldn’t help but think he had a hidden motive lurking somewhere.

“I didn’t mindlessly think of saving you,” Shohi murmured, apparently having

calmed himself down. “I thought that I had to execute you. Even if I knew everything, as you’d stated, had I tried to clumsily fool the public and foil your plans, I’d essentially be stomping all over your feelings. I had steeled myself. Without Keiyu’s final act, I would’ve executed you. When Keiyu made his proposal, I thoroughly looked it over, calmly assessed my choices, and decided it’d be best if I utilized it. Hence, I made my move. However, as you’re a foolish man who did something absolutely asinine, I cannot keep you by my side. I shall exile you from my empire.”

“Your Majesty,” Shusei started.

“Have faith in my decision. I command you, Shusei. You must *live*.” Shohi tightly gripped Shusei’s collar and ordered, “I want you to live.”

Shohi stared straight at Shusei.

“Your Majesty, I...” The cuisinologist’s kind eyes grew damp as his voice trembled.

“Do you accept me as the emperor?”

“I do.”

“Do you believe that I am worthy of my title?”

“I do.”

“Then trust my decision. Believe in the emperor that you put your faith in.” Shohi emanated an air of dignity and asked, “Do you believe in me?”

A single tear rolled down Shusei’s cheek.

“I do,” Shusei responded firmly with a small nod.

Master Shusei is... He’s...

Rimi had never seen Shusei’s tears before.

Shusei had learned the truth of his own birth and agonized over it. He had expressed his melancholy when he thought about the threat his origin posed to Shohi’s reign and the future of Konkoku. Though his decisions were levelheaded, he undoubtedly felt fear and sorrow that simply couldn’t be suppressed. But his emotions all started to melt away with Shohi’s words.

Because the words came from the emperor, Shusei's master, they left a deep impression on his heart.

Shohi released Shusei's collar from his grip, removed his knee from the bed, and turned to Rimi.

"Rimi," he said.

The consort, still in a daze, took a moment to respond.

"Yes?"

"I'll inform you of one more thing," Shohi said. "I told you that I'd reconsider your position, and I've finally come to a decision. The Mikado of Wakoku desires Setsu Rimi, a lady in relation to Kojin. I shall act accordingly and send you to Wakoku."

Rimi could hardly believe those words, her mind going blank.

Wakoku?

"It must be disheartening for you to head to a foreign nation alone. Take that man with you as an attendant," Shohi continued, pointing to Shusei.

"Huh?" the cuisinologist murmured.

"The waves of the open seas shall grow calmer in the spring. You two should go to Wakoku then."

"But Your Majesty, I've been sent to assist you from Wakoku. You were the one who gave me a place here, and I'd like to stay by your side and be of use to you," Rimi replied hastily, but Shohi raised his hand to stop her.

"If you truly would like to be of use to me, then I'd like for you to go to Wakoku with this man, who I admire as my older brother, and allow him to live."

I see. Even if someone else was executed in Master Shusei's stead, if word gets out that he's actually alive, the elaborate plan would fall apart.

For that, Shusei needed to head to a foreign nation and stay there forever. It was best to avoid nations that had frequent exchanges with Konkoku, such as the Southern Trinity and Saisakoku. While Wakoku depended on Konkoku, it

was separated by the sea, making it the perfect fit. Shohi was worried about sending Shusei alone across the vast sea and had thus requested for Rimi to tag along. However, this meant the emperor would lose both of them all at once.

“Are you sure about this, Your Majesty?” Rimi asked.

Shohi forced a laugh.

“I have plenty of people I can trust. Should one or two leave my side to live in a faraway land, it won’t be lonesome for me one bit. Will you accept the offer, Rimi?”

As Shohi gazed straight into Rimi’s eyes, he didn’t express any anxiety. His quiet and composed demeanor exuded an aura of grace. Clearly, he was making this offer after much contemplation.

It was as though the emperor was silently forcing her to follow his orders and wouldn’t accept any complaints. She couldn’t fight back.

“If...that is what you truly desire, Your Majesty, I shall,” Rimi finally replied.

“Of course. It is what I desire.”

Upon hearing his voice, Rimi instinctually bowed her head and wanted to follow his order.

“Then I shall accept, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 7: Because There's Only a Single Flower

I

I feel like I'm dreaming.

A pale glow of light illuminated the room behind Rimi. She stood in front of the handrail of the corridor and looked up at the night sky as specks of snow started to fall. The Jade Spring had frozen over and was buried in snow, making it seem like a snowy plain.

In the room behind her, Shohi, Jotetsu, and Shusei were quietly enjoying a drink and a feast. Rimi had taken a few sips of red wine, warming her body.

She had left the room, stating that she'd like to get a breath of fresh air. She still couldn't process reality. She had agonized so much until now that she simply couldn't believe her current situation.

"Setsu Rimi," a voice said.

From beyond the corridor, To Rihan approached her.

"Minister of Revenue, what brings you here?" Rimi asked with a bow as she raised her head.

Rihan stood in front of her, wearing a fur coat that protected him against the snow. His appearance made him look bigger than usual.

"I was present for the execution today, so I was a bit curious about matters. I heard that His Majesty is here, so I decided to drop by," Rihan said. He heard the quiet voice of Shusei from the room and then nodded slightly. "It seems all went well. That's all I came here for. I shall be taking my leave."

"Will you not go in?" Rimi asked.

"I don't wish to be seen by His Majesty right now. Keep my visit here a secret."

As he turned on his heels, Rimi stopped him.

“Um, Minister. Thank you. Had you not notified His Majesty last night...”

Rihan stood still and answered with his back still turned.

“I simply relayed a message as per his request. Keiyu was the one who did it.”

“Why did the Minister of Rites make that suggestion?”

When Rimi had heard Keiyu’s proposal, she’d felt that his motives were rather strange. Rihan kept his back turned and gazed toward the frozen Jade Spring.

“I haven’t a clue about his true thoughts, but if I were to guess... He might’ve wanted to manipulate others until the very end. He enjoyed manipulating people,” he answered.

“Manipulating?”

“With his proposal, in exchange for his life, he could manipulate His Majesty’s feelings and change the emperor’s resolve. Whether it be for good or evil, that man may have gotten a rush out of it all.”

He thought like that until the very end?

Rimi still couldn’t understand. Suddenly, Rihan turned around as though he’d remembered something.

“Ah, Setsu Rimi, I almost forgot. Keiyu said that he wanted to express his gratitude toward you. He said that your tian zhou was delicious.”

“His gratitude...” This came as a shock to her.

“That’s what he said. Now, I shall be taking my leave.”

As Rimi gazed at Rihan’s back vanishing into the distance, she suddenly came to a realization.

His gratitude?!

If Keiyu had heard Shusei’s admittance of the truth amidst the darkness, then surely he’d also heard Rimi’s voice of despair and everything else. Had that man truly wanted to send a word of satisfaction for his meal?

What if he conveyed his thanks in a different form?

Speckles of cold snow started to fall on the tip of her nose. No one truly knew

why Keiyu had offered to be Shusei's sacrifice. As Rihan had said, perhaps he really wanted the thrill of manipulating the emperor's resolve. Perhaps, as Keiyu had stated himself, he wanted to ruin Shusei's perfect plan. Or perhaps, just maybe, he unconsciously wanted to express his gratitude toward Rimi. The tian zhou that touched his lips may have changed something in his heart without him even knowing...

No one would ever know the true motives behind Keiyu's actions.

"Rimi," Shusei called as he came out of the room. "You've been out here for quite some time, so His Majesty was getting worried."

"I'm sorry," Rimi replied. "I suppose I was in a bit of a daze."

"Were you with someone?"

Shusei stood by her side and noticed the footsteps remaining in the corridor.

"The Minister of Revenue was just here to confirm how you were, Master Shusei. He said he wasn't in the mood to be seen by His Majesty and left. He also wanted to keep his visit a secret from him."

"He was friends with the Minister of Rites, after all. Whatever the case, I'm sure the minister is experiencing his fair share of grief after watching his friend die right before his eyes."

Light leaked from the room behind them and mixed with the flecks of snow. Rimi was reflecting upon her happiness as Shusei stood beside her. She would stay at the Palace of the Water Spirit until spring, secretly living with Shusei.

That afternoon, Shohi had all the handmaids and servants leave the palace to protect Shusei's secret. Currently, only the guardsmen protecting the emperor were present, but even they were forbidden from approaching the manor where Shusei and Rimi would live. Almost all the lights of the Palace of the Water Spirit were out, and it was mostly quiet.

"I wonder if we really should follow His Majesty's orders," Shusei muttered as he looked at the Jade Spring surrounded by snow. "I accepted it all, but part of me still cannot agree to my life continuing. My own ambitions cornered Ho Neison to his death. The chief general and the Minister of Justice were backed into a corner as well, causing their deaths, and countless soldiers died. I feel it's

only a sin for me to continue living.”

I’m sure Master Shusei will be tormented by these thoughts throughout his entire life. That might be what the Minister of Rites had hoped for, allowing him to get the last laugh.

Keiyu was Shusei’s superior. If the former was aware of what tormented and agonized the latter, then the Minister of Rites may have been able to give a mocking smile, knowing that the cuisinologist would be faced with a lifetime of pain.

Shusei’s actions did indeed make him responsible for the lives lost as a result of his war. Rimi, Shohi, and Shusei were well aware of that. Despite that, Shohi had ordered Shusei to live. Shohi may have been aware that Shusei would be tormented by his actions for his entire life. It would be much longer than a quick, merciful death, and that would be the punishment the scholar would have to bear.

As the emperor, Shohi surely would’ve accounted for how Shusei would atone for the lives he’d taken. The emperor had once been prepared to kill Shusei; his decisions didn’t come from his emotions but from calmly assessing the situation.

“His Majesty made his choice. I believe we should simply follow it,” Rimi replied.

“Even regarding the orders he gave you?”

Rimi nodded silently.

“What feelings did His Majesty have when he said he’d let you go?” Shusei asked.

“I do not know. But it’s clearly a decision he came to after much contemplation.”

Shohi certainly must’ve thought long and hard about Rimi’s future. As such, his order would’ve benefited both him and Konkoku the most. If this was the best choice, then Rimi should obey it.

“I’m just a phantom,” Shusei commented. “Since I cannot stay alive in

Konkoku, it's only natural for me to leave this empire. But are you all right with leaving His Majesty's side?"

"I am, as that is His Majesty's order," Rimi replied. "It'll be a bit lonely is all. I'll be bidding farewell to His Majesty, Master Hakurei, Master Jotetsu, the four consorts, Master Kyo Kunki, Chancellor Shu, Ryo Renka, and Tama. I don't want to part with them, but it's the order that I have received."

When Rimi was in Wakoku as an Umashi-no-Miya, she barely had any contact with other people. She only dearly missed her Saigu sister, who she had not wanted to part ways with. In Konkoku, however, she had quite a few people that she would miss. Though their existence was seen as minuscule when compared to god, Rimi wanted to serve them regardless. Those people were dear to her.

"I got to meet many people, and they gave me a place here," Rimi said. "When I first arrived at Konkoku, had I not met you, Master Shusei, His Majesty surely would've taken my head."

Thinking back, had the maids not been bewildered by Rimi, who was trying to enter the rear palace with a kaorizuke pot in hand, and called for Shusei, she wouldn't be alive. Because she met him back then, he protected and prevented her from being beheaded. Because she met Tama in the kitchen, she could serve Shohi and stay by his side, allowing her to glean the true nature of the emperor. Rimi was only able to meet Tama thanks to Hakurei. Whatever he had schemed from the start, it allowed Rimi to serve Shohi.

Rimi had then met the four consorts, spent time with them, and her life had been spared by Jotetsu and Kyo Kunki. She was able to meet Gulzari Shar, Shuri, and Aisha of Saisakoku, a nation she had thought was like a fairy tale when she had been in Wakoku.

"I've met so many people that I never would have expected. So many things have happened," Rimi said.

"I'm sure they were unexpected," Shusei answered with a pensive nod, deeply moved by these words. He then looked at her oddly. "Speaking of the unexpected, I'm most perplexed by your relationship with the Quinary Dragon. Why was it so attached to you? Since I see it practically glued to His Majesty's

side now, I cannot help but be curious.”

“Hm, I wonder...”

Rimi tilted her head to one side. She was also unsure of the reason and had simply assumed the dragon grew fond of her because she fed it. But ever since she saw Tama’s true nature, she didn’t think the divine beast had gotten attached to her because of the food.

“Tama is a divine dragon. I’m sure she experienced something we’re unaware of, but I cannot deny that she was behaving strangely,” Rimi admitted. “Whenever I see Tama by His Majesty’s side, I breathe a sigh of relief now. I feel like she’s where she belongs. I can tell that her place by His Majesty’s side is very comforting, so I feel even more relieved by the sight. Tama, who’s chosen her place, has made His Majesty the true emperor, and thus, I feel compelled to follow his orders.”

Shusei was silent for a while before he finally responded.

“Certainly. Since His Majesty has become the true owner of the Quinary Dragon, I suppose I must follow his orders as well.” After steeling himself, Shusei looked up, his expression changing completely to concern. “Why don’t we go back inside? Your hands have grown so cold.”

Shusei placed his hand over Rimi’s, which was atop the handrail. His hands were warm. When she looked up, she was met with his kind gaze. Feeling his presence and warmth made her so happy that her body shook with joy. While they stared into each other’s eyes, he gave her a strained smile.

“I always found you so dear,” Shusei said. “His Majesty has allowed me to touch you like this, but every time I do so, I’m reminded of my sins. This must be my punishment as well—every time I touch you, I must remember what I’ve done.”

Rimi placed her other hand over his as he peered into her eyes.

“For me, my meeting with you spared my life. Meeting you was my fate, and if Heaven arranges it so that I continue to live, then I shall always stay by your side, Master Shusei,” Rimi confessed. “Together with you, I shall accept your crimes, and I will never leave you. I’ve been blessed by the people I’ve met, and

I believe I've experienced happiness in Konkoku. And I think I've found happiness with you as well. It may not be pure and beautiful, and there may be spots of sin, but I still believe that staying alive is being happy as long as you are with me, Master Shusei."

Rimi wasn't greedy enough to wish for a perfectly beautiful and pure form of happiness that everyone would agree with. Hers was small and surrounded by sin. It tore at her chest and might have been humiliating and suffocating, but she felt she found a place that was much too good for a person like herself. In the depths of the imperial palace, her very existence was said to cause trouble, yet she was loved by her Saigu sister and had met some precious people in Konkoku.

This was more than enough for Rimi. Shusei quietly listened to her words and firmly nodded as though he was carefully committing her words to memory.

"Truly. I chose my path with resolve, Rimi..." he whispered, bringing his face close to hers. "Please stay by my side. Always."

After he drew so close to Rimi that she could feel his breathing, he gently kissed her. Rimi's cold lips felt the warmth of Shusei's. His lips were as warm as his hands. He drew her close and kissed her deeply. Confusion, anxiety, guilt—Shusei was definitely feeling a myriad of emotions, but he accepted them all. It was all because his master, whom he had risked his life to protect, had ordered him to do so.



Shusei was able to kiss her like this because he'd accepted his master's feelings. Had he been unable to do so, he would never have been able to touch a hair on Rimi's body. Rimi expressed her gratitude to the emperor, who served as both her and Shusei's master, from the bottom of her heart. She paid him the utmost respect.

This is what His Majesty has given me.

Snow continued to fall.

My place for the rest of my life is by Master Shusei's side.

Snow piled up as though it was continuing to conceal her thoughts that no one else knew, hiding the man who had to remain dead to the public. Snowblooms blossomed on the withered tree branches. They were glittering beautifully, reminding everyone that their lives were fleeting. Amidst the freezing temperature, the elegant snowblooms proudly buried the gaps between the branches of the Palace of the Water Spirit.

I hope more snow will fall.

The sleet would cover their sadness and suffering so that they'd be greeted with a scene of pure white by tomorrow.

And so, winter quietly passed.

It was the early spring in the 104th year of the Konkoku calendar. At Koto, one of the three great ports of Konkoku, a ship sent by the Mikado of Wakoku docked. It was filled with gifts for the Konkoku emperor, and Wakokuan envoys brought them into the peaceful areas of the capital. In exchange, the Konkoku emperor sent what the Mikado of Wakoku had desired—a lady in relation to Chancellor Shu Kojin. A single servant who was fluent in Wakokuan accompanied her. The lady and her servant boarded the ship and headed for Wakoku. The name of the sent lady was Setsu Rimi, but the identity of the young man who was her servant remained unknown.

“What?! No way! That’s so sudden! How horrible!” a voice wailed like a child.

Virtuous Consort Ho was surprised to hear the fuss the moment she arrived at the Palace of the Northern Peaks.

“Just what is going on?” she asked.

She opened the folding door, allowing the spring breeze to flow through the reception hall. Hakurei stood by the wall, and Shohi was seated at the table in the middle of the room. Noble Consort So, Pure Consort Yo, and Worthy Consort On were already present. Yo had fallen onto the table and loudly wailed, “How horrible!” in between her sobs.

Ho had heard that Shohi would be at the Palace of the Northern Peaks that morning. One of her handmaids had suddenly fallen ill, so she had arrived a bit later than the other three consorts. She couldn’t understand the current situation.

Shohi looked extremely troubled, and Yo was sobbing. So and On were glaring at Shohi dubiously.

The moment Ho set foot in the room, she was petrified by the scene, but she managed to turn to Hakurei, who was nearby.

“What’s going on, Hakurei?” she asked.

“Rimi has been sent to Wakoku by the order of His Majesty,” the man replied, looking a little troubled as well.

“Huh?! But wasn’t she sent here from Wakoku?”

“The moment she became a candidate for empress, she became a princess in relation to Chancellor Shu. And as such, technically, it looks as though His Majesty has sent a princess of Konkoku.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

The Virtuous Consort approached the table and was met with a questioning gaze from So and On, as though they were confirming if she heard the whole story. Ho nodded and gracefully greeted Shohi.

“I’ve heard about the Lady of Precious Bevy. Why was this decision made so suddenly?” she inquired sternly to His Majesty.

“It’s not sudden at all,” Shohi replied. “I received a letter at the beginning of winter last year from the Mikado of Wakoku. He asked for Rimi.”

“And you complied with his request? Why?”

“Because I decided that was the best choice.”

“On what grounds do you declare that? During the Rebellion of the Ho House, I heard that you had reconsidered her position as a candidate for empress. I was curious as to why you made that decision so abruptly as well. And you’ve done the same this time too. May I ask to know what you’re thinking?”

So stared straight at Shohi as though she wouldn’t allow any excuses. On looked sorrowful as she rubbed Yo’s back.

“Your Majesty, you must explain your reasoning to us. Or else Pure Consort Yo will not agree to this and continue weeping,” the Virtuous Consort implored him.

“She was special to you, was she not, Your Majesty?” Yo looked up and cried through her tears. “You even made her a candidate to become empress and tried to love her. Why did you send her to Wakoku?”

Shohi slowly glanced at each of the four consorts.

“I wanted to keep Rimi by my side,” he replied. “I was able to feel at ease near her, and she is very dear to me. I do not deny that. At first, I wanted to make her mine—I’ve thought so several times. However, as I spent more time with her, my feelings started to change. I still want to be with her. She makes me feel at ease, and I still find her very dear, but I no longer want to make her mine. If I do so, I feel the peace I’ve been seeking from her will crumble away.”

“Whatever do you mean?” the Noble Consort asked, her brows furrowed.

Shohi cleared his throat and decided to be a bit more straightforward.

“I shall be clear. I simply do not hold any feelings toward her as a man. I do not seek her as a woman, and should I do so, I feel like I’d lose what I desire from her.”

The four consorts looked at each other.

“Do you mean that you do not see the Lady of Precious Bevy as a lover but as

a friend or relative?" asked a puzzled So.

"Thinking back, you may be right about that." Shohi shifted his gaze to the garden, which was covered in the blooming white plum blossoms of early spring. Their faint aroma wafted into the room. "I never knew my mother's love. Perhaps I yearned for something similar. I hoped for someone who would unconditionally accept, love, console, and protect me. I wanted those feelings toward me to never waver. Thus, I was reluctant to let her go."

If memory serves me correctly, His Majesty's mother, Noble Consort En, was a person of violent tendencies, Ho thought.

Those rumors had originated from the rear palace. Noble Consort En had been so violent that the other consorts and concubines had feared her. Her selfish actions had been a sore sight for the eyes, and she didn't even bother showing the young Shohi an ounce of affection.

"But wherever Rimi may be, whatever may happen, she will approve of me and look at me warmly. I can say so with confidence. And if that's the truth, then there's no need for her to stay by my side. In fact, keeping a lady who I don't even love as a woman by my side would be rather inconvenient. That's all there is to it. I was puzzled about how to handle her," Shohi continued, turning to the four consorts once more. He declared, "With firm conviction, I believe sending her to Wakoku will make her happy, so I did so."

His powerful, confident tone could convince anyone on the receiving end of his words. The Pure Consort blinked several times.

"Is she happy now?" Yo asked.

"That is what I believe. If I didn't, I would never have sent her."

The four consorts simultaneously relaxed their bodies as they all seemed to have come to an agreement about Shohi's actions.

He yearned for her, understood what he must do, and let her go.

Ho smiled.

His Majesty has undeniably matured quite a bit.

The first day Shohi had arrived at the rear palace, he was a boy who had

seriously declared cutting off So's tongue. He could hardly believe that the boy from back then and the emperor in front of her were the same person. As time passed, Shohi had experienced numerous things and transformed into a wonderful young man. He was manlier than ever before.

Therefore, perhaps he no longer has a need for the Lady of Precious Bevy.

However, Rimi was surely essential in turning Shohi into the man he was today.

"Do you all understand?" Shohi asked.

The four consorts nodded. Once the emperor had their consent, a mischievous glimmer twinkled in his eye.

"I'm glad," he said. "I wouldn't want you four to detest me. Should each of you agree to my actions, I must fulfill my duties as the emperor."

Three of the consorts immediately caught on and gasped, but Yo seemed to have missed the memo.

"Duties?" she asked dull-wittedly.

"An heir," he replied.

The Pure Consort turned pale and visibly shrank.

Shohi made a sour face.

"There's no need to be so frightened," His Majesty said. "I've promised you at the beginning, and I haven't forgotten: I won't force you if you do not want to. I will only do the act with those who have given me their consent. For those who have not given me their consent, I still expect you to look after my successor once he is born and fulfill the role of one of his mothers."

Noble Consort So gracefully placed a finger on her cheek, acting a little flirtatious.

"I came to the rear palace in the first place with that in mind," she said boldly.

Worthy Consort On sheepishly looked away.

"Um, I personally don't mind as well. It's my role, and I greatly love and respect you, Your Majesty," she muttered.

Pure Consort Yo spoke without any reservations.

“Huh... What should I do then?” she wondered.

“I know very well that you dislike men,” Shohi replied with a strained laugh.

“I don’t mind if it’s you, Your Majesty, but I suppose I’m still a bit unsure.”

“You can take your time and think about it.”

Upon hearing the three consorts’ replies, Virtuous Consort Ho seemed a little hesitant. She couldn’t lie about her feelings, and Shohi likely didn’t want her to either. Furthermore, the emperor she loved and respected would certainly not be displeased by her wishes and would forgive her. But as a consort, she was unsure if her selfishness would be allowed.

Perhaps it’s best if I vacated the rear palace.

However, Consort Ho wished to serve His Majesty. She viewed him as her master and strongly wished to stay by his side.

“I believe I do not need to be the heir’s biological mother,” Consort Ho finally said after much thought. “Though you have offered me your forgiveness, Your Majesty, the blood of the Ho House flows through my veins. I am afraid of giving birth to an heir, and I wish to avoid sowing seeds of strife. As such, should an heir be birthed by the other consorts, I shall love him as a mother should, educate him properly, and raise him to become the next emperor that we shall all respect. I shall do my utmost best.”

“You state you are from the Ho House, but you simply come from a branch of that household. I feel it’s not an issue to be bothered about,” Shohi replied.

“Even so, I carry the name of Ho, regardless of how closely related I am to the household. I fear bringing additional conflict.”

“It seems inconvenient to be so intelligent,” Shohi mumbled before firmly nodding. “Very well. If that is what you wish, then I hope you shall fulfill your role.”

“Thank you,” Ho said with a bow.

The other consorts followed suit. Shohi smiled with satisfaction at the four consorts who loved and respected him. After a while, he left, claiming he still

had some work to finish.

The moment Shohi left, Consorts So and On happily squealed.

“What shall we do? What shall we do?!” they cried in excitement.

Seeing them both act so delighted made Yo’s emotions waver.

“I suppose I don’t mind if it’s with His Majesty,” she said, appearing deep in thought as she folded her arms in front of her.

Ho slapped each consort’s back. “In any case, you three must be in your best condition. I shall prepare our family’s secret medicinal tea. It warms the body and apparently makes it easier for you to bear children.”

It was Ho’s role to cheer on and watch over the other three. She felt elated. Though she had no desire to bear children, she felt like a mother looking after three excited girls.

“My, does such a thing exist? I shall drink it all, no matter how bitter it may be!” So exclaimed with sparkling eyes.

“Indeed. We must give His Majesty an heir as soon as possible.” The ever-serious On nodded firmly.

Yo suddenly raised her hand. “Lady Ho, I may not be involved for now, but I’d still like to drink some!” she cried.

“We must strike while the iron is hot,” Ho replied. “I shall prepare it immediately so that you may start drinking it tonight. Please leave it to me.” She put a hand on her hip and pounded her chest with the other.

Ho, who’d received the hopes of three ladies, immediately left the Palace of the Northern Peaks. As she rushed out, she bumped into Hakurei, who was returning from an errand that was requested by Shohi. She could only make him out vaguely, but his movements hadn’t changed much. However, it seemed he’d often brush his fingers against pillars and walls.

“Virtuous Consort Ho, are you returning to the Palace of Great Purity?” he asked with a flawless smile and bow.

He must’ve confirmed her height from her shadow and sensed Ho from the sound of her footsteps.

“I’m returning to create a medicinal tea. Ah, Hakurei, once I do, would you kindly deliver it to the other three consorts? Their bodies shall become most precious in the future, so I can only entrust this task to someone dependable.”

Hakurei gazed at her with unfocused eyes, clearly concerned. “I believe you’ve made the ideal decision for His Majesty. But are you not lonely?”

“Not at all,” Ho replied with a smile. “I have you.”

Hakurei looked astonished as he quickly gauged his surroundings. Once he saw that no one was near, he lowered his voice.

“I find it most unwise to say such things. Surely you know how that could cause misunderstandings,” Hakurei murmured.

“Cause misunderstandings? Not at all. I love you. I’ve loved you in the past, and I still do now.” Ho confessed her feelings without an ounce of hesitation or timidity.

Hakurei stood there, completely at a loss for words.

He’s surprised. Serves him right. That’s punishment for causing me so much agony over the years. I hope you stay shocked.

“I’m a eunuch,” he finally replied after a long silence. With a bow, he took a step forward. Just as he passed by the consort, he whispered in her ear, “But I can still love you, Hekishu.”

“Wha?!”

Red-faced, Ho turned around. Hakurei had a bewitching smile on his face before he walked away as though nothing had happened, keeping up his usual swaying mannerisms.

He got me. I’m so vexed!

She thought that she had made him unnerved, but he immediately launched a counterattack. She bit her lip and covered her blushing cheeks.

How dare he say such a thing to me!

Jotetsu stood there, his eyes wide with surprise. “What are you doing here, Minister Ryo?”

Jotetsu had assumed that the cuisinology hall would be empty and had opened the door without any reservations. However, he was greeted by Ryo Renka, the Minister of Personnel, carrying a few books along with Kyo Kunki, who’d been the imperial guard appointed to protect Shohi. Kunki, who was standing in front of the bookcase, was at Renka’s beck and call.

“Come now, Kunki. You must deliver that to Yo Koshin, the Chief of Dining,” Renka ordered before turning to Jotetsu. “I’m simply doing what Rimi requested. She asked that we not extinguish the study of cuisinology. As such, I must study the research and pass it on to the appropriate personnel.”

“Ah, I see... Thank you for your hard work,” Jotetsu replied.

It was unclear if the Minister of Personnel had such time on her hands, but Renka was a capable woman. She’d surely do what was needed efficiently and leave the miscellaneous affairs to her vice minister. She’d take care of this matter in a competent fashion.

His face smooth as a boiled egg, Kunki clearly looked displeased as he carried a pot toward the entrance.

“What’s that pot?” Jotetsu asked.

“It’s a kaorizuke pot that Lady Rimi left for us. We’ll give it to Yo Koshin and integrate it into the feasts for His Majesty,” Kunki replied.

“Ah, I remember.”

It reminded Jotetsu of the time when he first met Rimi. He’d stolen it, thinking the pot must’ve contained some sort of secret, but it ended up being a normal pickle pot, earning him a severe scolding from Shusei.

“The Minister of Personnel always goes out of her way to call for me should she need anything,” Kunki said in a low voice. “My duty is to be His Majesty’s guard. I’m sure that she’s still holding it against me for tying her up when I was suspicious of her being Lady Rimi’s kidnapper.”

“What are you dawdling for?” Renka demanded. “Hurry up and go, Kunki.

We've still got a mountain of work to do."

"Yes, sir!" Kunki gave a defiant response and carried the pot out.

As Jotetsu watched him leave with pity in his eyes, it was his turn to be questioned.

"What did you come here for, Shin Jotetsu?" Renka asked.

"Oh, nothing in particular. I simply thought that this place was deserted."

"You probably came here to take a nap, didn't you?"

Renka had hit the nail on the head. As Jotetsu sheepishly scratched his head, the minister pushed three books onto him.

"If you've got time, bring those over to Kojin," Renka ordered.

"All right, all right."

Left with no choice, Jotetsu took the books and headed to the Hall of Law and Culture. Kojin was standing on the veranda off his office with a perplexed face as he glared at a book in his hand. He noticed Jotetsu approaching and looked at him dubiously.

"What are you here for?" Kojin asked.

"Minister Ryo asked me to deliver these to you."

Jotetsu placed the books on the desk of the office.

"Good work," Kojin replied with a nod.

He's gotten much less prickly.

Only Shohi, Jotetsu, Rihan, and Kojin were aware that Shusei was alive and had headed to Wakoku with Rimi. Kojin had apparently told his wife, Mrs. Yo, that Shusei's actions were all for Shohi, but Shusei's survival had been kept from her.

Kojin had always kept even his wife in the dark when it came to political affairs; he was as thorough as ever in taking secrets to his grave. Still, he no longer seemed as tense as before.

"Perhaps even you, Chancellor, feel a bit lonely when you think about never

meeting your son again,” Jotetsu commented snidely.

Kojin glared at him as Jotetsu stood there with a smile, waiting for the chancellor to fight back.

“I think you may be right,” Kojin murmured as he turned away from Jotetsu to gaze toward the garden. “It’s a bit out of character for me, if I may say so myself.”

Jotetsu was only met with disappointment as he leaned on the table while folding his arms in front of him.

A bit too out of character, I think, Jotetsu pondered.

The chancellor had become more human than ever before, and Jotetsu was tempted to tease him for that, but at the same time, Kojin had become slightly pitiful. He may have not noticed it himself, but he was quite the doting parent.

“Now now, no need to be so down,” Jotetsu consoled.

“I’m not down.”

“Showing others such a depressing back implies that you’re feeling down. His Majesty would surely be bothered if he sees you so blue, so please don’t show it to him,” Jotetsu said. “You’ve even got what you can sort of call an adoptive son right here. You can dote over me all you want and cheer yourself up.”

Kojin turned around and furrowed his brows. “You don’t possess any adorable qualities that would make me want to dote over you.”

“Hey, you’re not wrong,” Jotetsu said with a smile.

He felt a bit of relief when he received Kojin’s thorny remarks.

I think it suits you best when you sound a little spiteful, Father.



Shohi absentmindedly stared at the branch of white plum blossoms that had been daintily arranged in his living quarters.

Shusei remembered that I like white plum blossoms.

While hints of snow remained in the early spring, the white flowers cheered the emperor up, reminding him that the breeze would soon turn warm.

Rimi and Shusei should've boarded the ship from Koto. They must be on the seas by now.

A few days ago, Rimi and Shusei had snuck out of the Palace of the Water Spirit and left with a Wakokuan envoy. With only Jotetsu by his side, Shohi had secretly visited the palace and sent the two off.

The emperor had been prepared to bid them farewell.

"Stay well," was all he had said before he fell silent; he couldn't find anything else to say.

Rimi and Shusei apparently had the same thoughts.

"Please be well too, Your Majesty," Rimi had said.

"I believe that your reign shall continue in peace for many years to come," Shusei had added.

And that had been it.

The Quinary Dragon may have expressed its loneliness the most. It clutched onto Rimi's chest and cried over and over again, rubbing its head onto her. Rimi stroked its small head and the fur on its smooth back.

"Be well. Thank you," she kept repeating.

With that, the two had left. Once Shohi returned to the imperial palace, the Quinary Dragon glumly curled up into a ball. The emperor put the dragon on his lap and petted it, making it feel a little better. Ever since, the divine dragon's daily routine consisted of it dozing off on Shohi's lap.

Even now, it was curled up on his lap as he sat atop a sofa, and it seemed satisfied with the pets it was receiving. Slowly, it closed its eyes and dozed off.

Just then, Jotetsu entered.

"I suppose I can't misbehave," he muttered as he rested on the ledge of the open circular window.

"What happened?" Shohi asked.

"I thought that the cuisinology hall was deserted, so I went there to take a

nap.”

“A nap? I’m disappointed. I can’t believe you’d report something like that to your master.”

“Aren’t you resting currently as well, Your Majesty? It’s not a sin for me to rest every now and then too. Ah, but I suppose I’ve been punished for it. Minister Ryo was at the hall, doing her best to carry on the art of cuisinology. I was ordered to run an errand to the Hall of Law and Culture.”

“Indeed, you’ve certainly been punished for your sin. Isn’t that right, Quinary Dragon?”

Shohi smiled and the dragon gave a wide yawn, giving a mocking side-eye toward Jotetsu.

“Well, that’s not cute at all, Quinary Dragon,” Jotetsu said. “I feel like you acted a lot cuter when you were by Rimi’s side. Have you taken after your master?”

“That was surely a roundabout insult toward me, was it not?”

“Of course not.” Jotetsu grinned while crossing his arms behind him as he leaned on the window ledge. “In any case, I’m still really confused. Why was the Quinary Dragon so attached to Rimi? One could say that it was simply filling in the void while you officially became the emperor, but surely the dragon doesn’t need to be by a human’s side at all times? I feel like it could’ve just scurried about and done what it desired.”

Shohi had been puzzled and thought about this as well numerous times. Recently, he’d started to think of one possibility.

“I believe that there were two people fated to become the emperor,” Shohi replied.

“Two?”

“Myself and Shusei.”

Shusei, the child of Seishu, could’ve taken the throne depending on the circumstances. He was also gentle, kind, and intelligent.

While Shohi had the title of emperor, he used to be quick to anger and was

always in an unpleasant mood. He was a child ignorant of perseverance.

“Both Shusei and I had the potential to become emperor. And Heaven was searching to see who would be more suitable for the role. The Quinary Dragon had also received this divine will and didn’t accept me. But then, Rimi entered the rear palace.”

Rimi was an existence both Shohi and Shusei were fated to love and desire. Since she was loved by both of them, the Quinary Dragon saw that the divine will was condensed toward her. Whichever man would take the throne, if it was by Rimi’s side, it was always able to be by the one who would become emperor.

“Do you not think that this is a possibility?” Shohi surmised.

“I see. You could be right. But in the end, you possessed the divine will, Your Majesty. You were destined by Heaven,” Jotetsu said as he looked up at the ceiling and listened intently.

“No.” Shohi shook his head. “Shusei, who could’ve also been destined to become the emperor, rejected his own fate and gave me the blessing from Heaven. Had Shusei truly wanted to take the throne from the bottom of his heart, he very well could’ve become the emperor instead.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because Rimi loves Shusei. And in a sense, I truly didn’t desire her.”

Rimi, who had the role of the Umashi-no-Miya, served the god in Wakoku. She was also loved by the highest-ranking shrine maiden there and may have served a similar role to the Quinary Dragon. Had her heart been won, the victor could also receive the Quinary Dragon, who was practically glued to her side.

Had the gods truly been unable to decide on the emperor, the equilibrium would be broken once either of the two men possessed the Quinary Dragon, causing Heaven to make its move.

While Shusei had obtained Rimi’s heart, he had rejected his destiny to become the emperor. He was so stubborn that even the gods had to admit defeat. And because Shusei had refused, confusion and uproar had ensued.

“But you still seem a bit regretful,” Jotetsu observed, glancing at the emperor.

“You claim that you truly didn’t desire Rimi, yet you’re vexed that she fell in love with Shusei. And still, you sent her away with him to Wakoku. Are you really fine with all of this?”

Shohi reflected on his actions and nodded. While he didn’t desire Rimi, he felt he was lacking as a man for being unable to fill her void, and he was a little ashamed of that.

“If I were to be honest, it’s a bit regrettable,” Shohi admitted. “But if she attains happiness with Shusei, then I shall be at ease. I love Rimi. I cannot deny that some of my feelings must love her as a woman, but above all, there are other larger feelings residing within me that cannot simply be defined as romantic love. And so, I let her go. Rimi is a special existence to me, and she shall be irreplaceable. She is my one and only.”

She was a nameless flower who hailed from Wakoku. The girl who had given the emperor such an impression had bloomed into a special existence for him. She was his lover, younger sister, older sister, mother, subject, and friend. She was unique, unlike anyone else, and an irreplaceable being to Shohi. The nameless flower from a foreign nation had become the only blossom for the emperor—a court flower.

“But I suppose I’ll never see her again,” Shohi muttered.

“You can,” Jotetsu said with a smile.

“When? And how?”

“You can simply go and meet her. Let’s see... When you give your heir the throne and become an old man living in leisure, you can prepare a ship and head to Wakoku, traveling as you please.”

“Hm, I see. That’s certainly a method.” Shohi wryly laughed.

“I shall go with you,” Jotetsu added with a gentle smile.

High above them, the skylarks chirped energetically. The fragrance of the white plum blossoms floated in the room, and the spring breeze brushed against Shohi’s eyelashes.

The Quinary Dragon continued to doze away on his lap.

Future generations would look back on this time as the era that flourished the most in history. The most prosperous and peaceful era in the history of Konkoku was about to begin.



Afterword

Hello everyone! Miri Mikawa here. This is the final volume of the *Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower*. When I first had this story in mind (which spanned over 11 volumes), I told my editor at the time that it'd be great if the story could continue until the seventh volume without it being axed. When I was able to write up to the appearance of Shusei's father, I was truly happy because I thought I could finish the tale. *All right, to the seventh volume it is!* I initially thought, but then I was graciously given approval to write a bit more. And so, I was able to write the story that I had originally come up with and build upon it as well!

It's all thanks to my readers, who stuck with me through it all. I'd like to truly thank you from the bottom of my heart. I frankly believe that I've been blessed with wonderful readers.

I also think that Kasumi Nagi's illustrations were a huge factor in allowing this story to continue until the end. I believe many readers were drawn in by the beautifully illustrated cover, beckoning you to read the book. The characters were illustrated handsomely and beautifully in not only the color illustrations but the monochrome ones within the books as well. They're soothing to the eyes. While the cover was breathtaking, the monochrome illustrations depicted the characters' emotions and were laid out in a wonderful fashion that was certainly pleasing to see. I always looked forward to them.

Even Kunki was drawn in color at the end! I'm very fortunate to receive Nagi's loving artwork. I truly cannot express my gratitude enough. Thank you so, so much.

I'm also grateful to the previous person in charge who helped me start this series. Without them, *Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower* never would've existed. Work aside, while I was struggling with my personal affairs, I was able to continue my work without giving up because I enjoyed working with them. Even now, they are my angel.

In addition, the current person in charge who took over was unbelievably busy, yet they took their time to carefully guide my tale to its completion. I'm very grateful. I especially caused them so much trouble with Kojin, who was personally the most troublesome character ever. But I believe I was also able to properly integrate him into the story.

Thank you to the editors of Beans Bunko, the marketing team, and the digital book team. I know I wasn't very involved with that process, but I'm greatly indebted to you all. Thank you to all the bookstores that cheered me on as well. I cannot express my gratitude enough.

I believe our next meeting, if we do meet again, would be on April 25th, when my next book, *Senbunkaku no Kisho Mokuroku*, will be published via Kadokawa Bunko. It'll be a mash-up of Chinese cuisine and a library with strokes of fantasy. If you ever feel inclined to pick up the book, I'll be doing a little dance with joy. Please keep that in mind!

Lastly, once again, I'd like to thank all of my readers. It goes without saying that every reader has been supporting my work while I was writing this tale, but you have all provided me with emotional support as well. I'd be very happy if you were able to experience even a bit of fun through reading this series.

I cannot thank each and every one of you enough. I pray that we may one day meet again.

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 11

by Miri Mikawa

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